The New Criterion

April 2001

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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Volume 19, Number 8, $5.75

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Published monthly except July and August by The Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc., 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019, a nonprofit public foundation as described in Section 501 (c) (3) of the Internal Revenue code, which solicits and accepts contributions from a wide range of sources, including public and private foundations, corporations, and the general public. ISSN 0734-0222. April 2001, Volume 19, Number 8. Subscriptions: $36 for one year, $65 for two. Outside the United States, add $7 per year. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Postmaster and subscribers: send change of address, all remittances, and subscription inquiries to The New Criterion, P.O. Box 3000, Denville, NJ 07834. For subscription problems call (800) 783-4903. Copyright © 2001 by The Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc. Newsstand distribution by Eastern News Distributors, Inc., One Media Way, 12406 Rt. 250, Milan, OH 44846. (800) 221-3148. Available in microfilm from University Microfilms, 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106. All correspondence should be addressed to The New Criterion, 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019. (212) 247-6980. Notice of nonreceipt must be sent to the Office Manager within three months of the issue date. **Internet: http://www.newcriterion.com Email: letters@newcriterion.com**

Advertising: Fred Stern, 44 Paulin Boulevard, Leonia, NJ 07605. (201) 947-2674.

The New Criterion is designed by Alvin and James Eisenman. It is set in 10-point Galliard and is printed by Science Press in Ephrata, Pennsylvania, USA.

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Notes & Comments: April 2001

On "moral equivalence" . . .

The American Historical Review is widely considered the preeminent English-language journal for the discipline of history. The journal, a publication of the American Historical Association, is also conspicuously a captive of the left-wing bias that has permeated the teaching of history in Western universities. *The American Historical Review* is to the discipline of history what the *Publications of the Modern Language Association* is to literary studies: a repository of trendy, left-leaning, anti-American attitudes.

Of course there are exceptions: even the *PMLA* occasionally publishes something without obvious *parti pris*. But no reasonable observer can miss the bias. Thus it is business as usual that the lead article in the current number of the *AHR* (February 2001) is by the Marxist Eric Foner, this year's president of the American Historical Association. Entitled "American Freedom in a Global Age," the essay argues that really, when you come right down to it, American freedom is tantamount to a lack of freedom. "'Freedom,'" Professor Foner argues—note the scare quotes—"continues to occupy as central a place as ever in our political vocabulary, but it has been largely appropriated by libertarians and conservatives of one kind or another, from advocates of unimpeded market economics to armed militia groups insisting that the right to bear arms is the centerpiece of American liberty." Really? What about the freedom to publish presidential addresses for prominent academic organizations while safely perched in the comforting bower of academic tenure? Professor Foner omits dilating on *that* freedom, possibly because it would spoil his fantasy about America the Enemy.

Nor is Professor Foner's contribution the only evidence of doctrinaire academic leftism in the *AHR*. Far from it. This number also includes, *inter alia*, an attack on the United Fruit Company's operations in Central America and praise for a book that "contributes to the history of sexuality . . . by standing outside the normative status of heterosexuality and examining its construction as an ideal and a practice." A teaspoon of Marx, half-a-cup of Foucault. It is, as we say, only business as usual in the contemporary academy.

But with one article, the *AHR* really outdid itself. That is "Gridded Lives: Why Kazakhstan and Montana Are Nearly the Same Place." The title says it all. Written by Kate Brown, an assistant professor at the University of Maryland, the essay argues that Karaganda, a labor camp in the former Soviet Union, and Billings, Montana, are

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morally similar because both were laid out on a grid, and "can serve as an apparatus for conquest, as a way to dominate space." It sounds preposterous. It *is* preposterous. But it is also indicative of what passes for serious scholarship in the discipline of history today.

Professor Brown is canny about testing the credulity of her readers. She acclimatizes them gradually to absurdity. Thus she begins by frankly allowing that in one case we are dealing with a prison camp while in the other we are dealing with a pioneer city. "People were deported to Karaganda against their will. . . . [I]n the American Plains . . . they bought their own train tickets. Is that difference of free will essential?" Well, yes, you might say, if *that* is not essential, nothing is. But the burden of Professor Brown's long essay is to dissolve that difference—the difference between servitude and freedom—in a solvent of abstraction about the enslavements perpetrated by certain forms of city planning. If only, she says, we can get beyond the parochial, Cold-War idea that there is some crucial difference between Communism and capitalism, between democracy and totalitarianism, we will see that "the history of cities in Montana and Kazakhstan . . . tell not two stories but one—the history of gridded space." Actually, Professor Brown does believe that there are some important differences between the two. For although she equates "the American booster press and Soviet propaganda," it turns out that "the grief for what has been paved over . . . is a sign that in the United States, more than in the former Soviet Union, the destruction that accompanies a successfully expanding modernity has been far more complete." In other words, things might have been bad in a Soviet labor camp, but not nearly as bad as they were in the Wild West.

We suspect that Professor Brown's article will garner a lot of sympathetic attention from her colleagues. It is exactly the sort of work that is thought "brilliant" by the powers that be in the contemporary academy. The thesis is ridiculous; the arguments are tendentious; but the political position is irresistible. "Gridded Space" belongs firmly to the hoary genre that argues for a moral equivalence between the United States and totalitarian powers. It works like this: yes, of course, people in the Soviet camps "starved, froze, and worked until they dropped from exhaustion." But then we mustn't forget that "on the Great Plains people also starved, froze, and worked until they dropped from exhaustion." Besides, Professor Brown argues, if America and the former Soviet Union really "mirror" each other, then they represent "just the same form reflected backward." Note the argument: because the societies are completely different, they are really very similar if not, at bottom, the same. "In short," Professor Brown writes, "by straining away the mountains of verbiage encircling the Cold War, we may find the Soviet Union and the United States share a great deal in common."

In fact, anyone not blinded by ideology would see immediately that what we are talking about here is not *verbiage* but moral and political realities of the first order. "Straining away" the fundamental distinction between liberal democracy in the United States and Communist tyranny in the former Soviet Union does not reveal any essential identity between the two societies; on the contrary, it reveals the intellectual and moral frivolousness of the comparison.

The question remains, how do such implausible arguments win converts? Part of the answer has to do with the moral magnetism of abstract virtue. This has been an aid to credulousness at least since Jean-Jacques Rousseau confused the emotion of virtue with its reality. Jeane Kirkpatrick

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touched on the essential mechanics of its operation in a 1986 lecture called "The Myth of Moral Equivalence." "Marxism," she wrote,

> incorporates . . . the values of liberal democracy in its assault on liberal democracy and this is precisely why it entraps so many Western intellectuals who are themselves serious liberal democrats. Thus the slightest restriction on, let's say, the presumption of innocence of the accused is said to demonstrate the absence of the rule of law. The slightest failure of an electoral system demonstrates contempt for political equality. Any use of force in international affairs establishes the lawless character of the society. Now, it is a short step from having demonstrated that a country like the United States is not a law-abiding society to demonstrating that it is lost and that it is like any other lawless society. The Soviets can always claim "We are no worse than you. Even if we are a lawless society, you too are a lawless society, we are no worse than you." This is the "logic" of the doctrine of moral equivalence. If practices are measured by abstract, absolute standards, practices are always found wanting. The communists who criticize liberal democratic societies measure our practices by our standards and deny the relevance of their practices to judgments concerning the moral worth of our own society.

Articles like "Gridded Space" illustrate an academic variation of this procedure. An invented abstraction—"gridded space"—is proposed as a golden explanatory key before which all other distinctions, no matter how pertinent, must give way. The result is the creation of a never-never land in which genuine moral and political achievements—real, and therefore limited and imperfect—are sacrificed for the sake of imagined equivalence and unities. It is a mug's game, but one that has swept Western academic life virtually without resistance.

. . . *and moral blindness*

Lest it be thought that *The American Historical Review* has a monopoly on left-wing fantasy, we note that New York University's Tamiment Library has just launched a website to commemorate the Alger Hiss Story. (No wonder that the Tamiment Library is colloquially referred to as the "Commie Archive" by members of the NYU community.) According to an article in *NYU Today*, a university publication, the website was launched on the occasion of the publication of the paperback edition of *The View from Alger's Window*, a memoir by Hiss's son Tony that, we read, reflects on "his father's trial and imprisonment during the Cold War witch-hunts." The story goes on to note that Hiss "would spend 44 months in prison—and the rest of his life fighting to clear his name. With conflicting evidence on both sides, his guilt or innocence continues to inspire debate." In fact, the story of Alger Hiss continues to "inspire debate" only among those for whom his guilt is a metaphysical impossibility—for example, the directors of The Nation Institute, which helped to fund the website. For the rest of us, revelations from the recently opened Soviet archives simply corroborated what a mountain of evidence had already shown: that Alger Hiss, in addition to committing perjury (the felony for which he went to jail) was a KGB spy and a traitor. The thing to remember about those "Cold War witch-hunts" is that they turned up a number of real witches. Alger Hiss was one of them. On the scale of academic fatuousness, NYU's website honoring Alger Hiss ranks somewhere below Bard College's decision some years ago to accept money to create an Alger Hiss Chair of Social Studies. But it is nevertheless a useful reminder that the doctrine of moral equivalence regularly results in moral blindness.

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How civilizations fall

by Kenneth Minogue

How do civilizations fall? Islamic thinkers had an image for it. Consider a civilization based upon a court in a thriving city—Baghdad, for example. Arts and the intellect flourish. But over several generations, as the great Islamic philosopher of the fourteenth century Ibn Khaldun put it, the civilized become decadent with luxury. They lose their sharpness and think only of the good and the beautiful. And then some tribe of fierce Bedouin, smelling out weakness, come thundering in from the desert and storm the city. As barbarians, they do not understand the usages of civilization. They stable their horses in the libraries and use sculptures as doorstops, pictures for target practice. Given a pillow, Ibn Khaldun tells us contemptuously, they suppose it to be a bundle of rags. In time, however, the power of a superior culture is felt, and these people adopt and sometimes extend the ways of civilization, until they too are overthrown in their turn.

This is the way the world goes. Sometimes it happens in one lifetime, as with those barbarian soldiers who rose to become Roman emperors, sometimes in slow motion, as with the fall of the Roman Empire, in which many centuries were to elapse before the new civilization emerged from the disorders of the barbarian invasions. With us, the decor is quite different, but the realities may be closer than we suppose.

One reason we may not realize this is that the very distinction between barbarism and civilization has been suppressed by the current relativism, which asserts the equality of all cultures. Nobody, of course, seriously believes this. Quite apart from technology, the moral inequality of cultures is conspicuous in the position of women in different cultures. It was only the West that abolished slavery. But it is a mark of current decorum—perhaps avoidance of the dreaded "triumphalism"—that we should not proclaim any superiority in European civilization, even though it is the one place the millions want to get into. Instead, we must make do with a rationalist doctrine which transposes the usages of European civilization into a rather unsatisfactory set of abstractions about universal rights. By this device, all cultures (including the Western) can equally be found guilty of moral violation in one way or another.

In the past, civilization was a sensibility shared by a class of people, while barbarism would be found not only in tribes beyond the frontier, but also in the slaves and the servile within the realms of civilization itself. In modern liberal democracies, this clear relation between a culture and a class has disappeared. Everyone is touched by the higher forms of culture. Schooling, museums, and the media are available to all. But barbarism remains an active force in modern societies, partly in gracelessness and ignorance, and partly in a loss of cultural coherence found among those who mistake a few years at an institution of higher learning for education itself.

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In modern Europe, we don't quite have Bedouin storming in from the desert (merely millions of depressed migrants trying to slip through the gates), but the tendency towards barbarism is an active force all around us. Hence the formula for overthrowing a Western society must be not "storm the walls" but "organize your own barbarians" within the walls. Those who hate European civilization know that it cannot be taken by direct assault. It must thus be captured from within. This was the plan adopted by many revolutionaries, most notably, of course, by Marx who constructed a new and hostile tribe within the West called "the proletariat." They could be made into a revolutionary tribe by equipping suitable people (industrial workers for example) with a unified consciousness, so that in every transaction they understood themselves as a collective. They were being victimized by the oppressive bourgeois. Like the guardians in Plato's Republic, these revolutionary insurgents had to be taught to be docile within the movement while snarling at those without.

Marx provided the model for all subsequent movements aiming to take power. His "make your own tribe" kit was found useful by nationalists, anarchists, and many brands of socialist. Hitler made the most creative use of it by playing down victimization and representing every Aryan as a superior type of person. It took the world in arms to get rid of him. But before long, revolutionaries discovered that a revolution based on the proletarian tribe only really worked if you were dealing with pretty unsophisticated peoples—preferably non-Europeans who lacked all experience of freedom and genuine political life. In socially mobile European states, the workers mostly found better things to do with their time than waste it on revolutionary committees and the baby talk of political demonstrations. Something new was needed.

It was provided by such socialists as Mussolini and Lenin who adopted the principle of the Praetorian Guard: a tightly knit vanguard party, which could use the masses as ventriloquial dummies and seek power on its own terms. This development was part of a wider tendency towards the emergence of oligarchies ruling through democratic slogans.

In the course of the 1960s, a new tribe was established that also sought to overthrow the Western citadel from within and had notably greater success. This was Betty Friedan's radical feminists. It was a tribe constructed out of women who had taken some sort of degree and were living domestic lives. Technology had largely liberated them from the rigors of beating, sweeping, and cleaning, while pharmacology had released them from excessive procreation. In tactical terms, radical feminists made one innovation that has turned out to be crucial to the destiny of the West over the last half century. They suppressed almost completely the idea that their project involved a transfer of power and operated entirely on the moralistic principle that their demands corresponded to justice.

What lay behind this momentous development? It is a complicated question, but I think that Diana Schaub understood the essence of it in her essay "On the Character of Generation X":[1]

> [Betty] Friedan was right that the malaise these privileged women were experiencing was a result of "a slow death of the mind and spirit." But she was wrong in saying that the problem had no name—its name was boredom. Feminism was born of boredom, not oppression. And what was the solution to this quandary? Feminists clamored to become wage-slaves; they resolutely fled the challenge of leisure.

And by "leisure," Professor Schaub means something classically Greek: the higher employment of the mind once the necessities of life have been dealt with.

The first task of this new movement was to create the shared consciousness necessary for tribal functioning. Like all forms of

1 See *The Public Interest* (Fall 1999).

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psychic collectivism, "consciousness raising" (as it is known) exploits indignation and cultivates righteousness. It operated in this case with the basic liberatory image of the prison and, identifying happiness with being in the labor force, argued that only male oppression over the centuries had "confined" women to the domestic sphere. What radical feminism essentially did was to deny complementarity between the sexes and set men and women up as competing teams playing exactly the same game, but a game in which all the rules were stacked against the women. It was only on this eccentric assumption—i.e., that women had identical talents and inclinations to men—that they could support the conclusion that there had been foul play. As with Hitler's appeal to the Aryan race, the basic principle was one of flattery: women, it revealed, are a marvelously talented set of people who have been iniquitously suppressed by males running a patriarchal system.

This message entrenched identity politics, an emerging form of fundamentalism in which every judgment must begin from a supposedly essential self-identity as female. One implication (as with Marxism) was that a class of experts understood social reality better than any particular woman could, and any woman failing to agree needed the falsity of her consciousness corrected. Joined together, these judgments constituted the new doctrine now simply called "feminism." This was a massive psychic transformation in the life of European peoples. Back in the Second World War, Rosie the riveter was certainly a woman, but she was also a wife, a patriotic American involved in a struggle against fascism, and many other things besides. Most fundamentally of all, radical feminism attacked the very conception of the feminine as something that had been imposed upon women by superior force and had been reinforced by a culture of romance found in European art and literature.

All of this might be construed (as it was by radical feminists themselves) as a massive access of confidence among women, but it might also signify a complete collapse of the feminine in the face of a wider and more ambiguous project using women to create a totally androgynous (and manipulable) world. In such a world, men and women would become virtually indistinguishable.

Here then was nothing less than an attempt to destroy not merely an existing structure of power, but also the civilization that it sustained. In Ibn Khaldun's terms, it was an attempt to conquer the West from within, not by directly attacking its power (for no one doubted that the men had all the power needed to repel such an attack), but by exploiting certain features in its culture. And in order to understand the significance of this movement, we need to characterize the European civilization that was the object of their attack.

The most obvious fact about it is one that we can hardly mention, now that the revolution has succeeded, without embarrassment or derision, because it is a fact which powerful contemporary forces make recessive. It is simply that this civilization is, in the crude terms of creative hits, the achievement of white males. The history of Western civilization is a succession of clever men developing the set of traditions or inventing the benefits which, intertwined, constitute the West. And from Thales and Euclid to Einstein and George Gershwin, nearly all of them were male. They constitute the set of "dead white males" whom the radical revolutionaries in the sub-academic culture have denigrated and vowed to remove from their pedestals. I once heard a feminist put it this way: "There's no such thing as a great mind." This doctrine is so powerful that the simple factual statement that it has been men who have created what is commonly meant by Western (and for that matter, any other) civilization seems like an insensitive affront to the equality of mankind. And the next step in my argument must be to deal with this as a problem.

To say that men created all these things is true, and significant, but it is rather like stranding a lot of fish on a barren shore. It

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leaves out the medium of social and political life without which none of this could have happened. Like all social life, Europe was a world of sexual complementarity, and there is no reliable way of sifting out what was contributory from what was not. But of women we may say what Falstaff said of himself—namely that he not only had wit but also was a cause of wit in others. But by seeming to set women up as a weak team in relation to inventive men, I am merely pointing to the mistake radical feminists, who have accepted the abstract idea that the one thing that counts is who invented this or created that, themselves make. It is in pursuit of this mistake that they have attempted to set up a competing canon of writers, philosophers, painters, and so on whose talents were suppressed by the patriarchy. These resuscitated figures are often worth looking at in their own terms, but they cannot serve as a new canon. Camille Paglia famously said that if we had waited for women to invent civilization we should still be living in grass huts. It is also true that if we had waited for men to make life comfortable we should still be living in pigsties. For centuries women have determined the way we live. Radical feminist doctrine is that this is not enough: women can only be recognized as equal, and enjoy equality of esteem with men, if they are recognized as excelling in exactly the same activities as men. Women must, as a team, be able to point to a scoreboard of artistic and technological achievements on the same scale as men. Feminist tribal consciousness depends upon absorbing this and similar beliefs. But the whole rigmarole depends upon assuming that women are the same as men, that their happiness is found in exactly the same areas as that of men. But this is quite untrue, and it is a mistake that could only have occurred to a set of women whose minds had been deranged by a superficial contact with education in the humanities.

The point can be put another way: Western civilization is distinguished by an unusual curiosity about both nature and the lives of other societies. Europeans have appropriated many of their ideas and inventions from other civilizations. Partly for this reason, it has been extraordinarily open to others who wish to engage in its activities. Its religion, its languages, and its knowledge have been widely diffused, and by the twentieth century people from all over the world had become scientists, historians, novelists, artists, etc., in the Western manner, many of them indeed coming to live in the West. Some people from customary societies abroad have found Westerners cold and remote, but many more have experienced the West as a liberation.

The same is true for women. At various times in the past many women have had access to education, and, from the eighteenth century onwards, some women developed an increasing taste for taking up professions previously restricted to men. By the late nineteenth century they were making their way into universities. In doing so, they often suffered a certain derision from the more brutish among their male *confrères*. Other men were always on their side, however, and during the first half of the twentieth century women broke into many fields previously restricted by convention. Radical feminism as a tribal consciousness needs to tell this story as a struggle against oppression, and so in some ways it was. But we ought not to get this out of proportion. We are not talking of slavery or war.

The beneficiaries of this new development were for the most part middle-class white women, and they were merely experiencing the resistance common to any form of upward mobility. They were unmistakably following a rising wave created by the increasing flexibility of Western societies. It was in any case a Christian civilization, which meant that individual character counted as much as customary status. In most civilizations, human beings fit into a customary schema as warriors, wives, priests, scholars, artisans, merchants, and so on. The West became, as Ernest Gellner used to put it, "modular" in that individuals have multiple talents and skills and can fit together with

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others in flexible ways responding to new situations. Like furniture that can be rearranged at need, Europeans have the versatility to fit into many possible arrangements of work or pleasure. As women began to develop a taste for education and had opportunities to participate in a world beyond the domestic (previously available only to the rich), they soon succeeded (as they usually do) in getting what they wanted. Liberal feminism was thus a natural development from within the civilization. Suddenly in the 1960s, this development was overridden by the new radical doctrine that women could and should do everything men did. Liberal feminism emerged from the Western tradition, and traditions are flexible. It had no problem in admitting women to new professions without dramatically altering the wider relations between the sexes. But, radical feminism was doctrinaire and demanded that all women should live in the one true manner. A melodrama of oppression was needed to fire up the new tribe. Just as Buddhist priests must meditate on a human skull so that they will develop the right consciousness of human mortality, so feminist doctrine thrives on horror stories of women not allowed to take degrees at Oxbridge until this century. By contrast with the horrors of the twentieth century (or indeed the situation of women elsewhere in the world), we may diagnose a certain lack of proportion.

The openness of Western cultures is shown by the way in which, during the first half of the twentieth century, Western women were enjoying higher education and finding distinction in professional and academic fields. The numbers of women who largely devoted their lives to these fields was relatively small, and some people thought this was a problem, but it was only a problem for those who took their bearings from statistics rather than from the responses of actual people. The false assumption of male and female isomorphism is, however, the reason why at frequent intervals feminists in journalism become lobbyists and set up, as a defect in society, any difference in average wages between men and women or in the relative percentages of women in top jobs. This was the continual drip of the movement against patriarchy, and it is a well-known principle of propaganda that a proposition repeated enough will crush opposition. But these figures and this argument make no rational sense, and the fact that they appear regularly in newspapers as if they did make sense is why they must be challenged.

The key to modern Western civilization is its openness to talent wherever found. The feminist demand for collective quotas has overturned this basic feature of our civilization. The crucial point is that the character of a civilization is revealed by its understanding of achievement. European civilization responded to achievement wherever it could be found. To replace achievement by quota entitlements is to destroy one civilization from within and to replace it with another. We are no longer what we were. The problem is to explain how the West collapsed.

It did not result from warriors storming the walls of a decadent civilization, but by a fifth column exploiting weakness from within. And the weapon of attack was not the sword, but a moral rhetoric demanding justice. Economic and political implications (such as that able men would be denied jobs now having to be filled by quota) seldom featured in discussion. The defenders of the status quo found themselves profoundly confused, partly because they had earlier acquiesced in regarding moral and religious ideas as merely subjective. They could not agree on a line of defense, and the attack often came from within their own families. The objective of the attack was to get women with degrees into the higher ranks of the labor force. Of the more profound implications of this structural collapse, I am are not here concerned. I must concentrate on the more pressing question of why the defenders so easily capitulated.

In earlier centuries, the project of getting women into the labor force would have been

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visionary, partly no doubt because no one thought in terms of a labor force. For one thing, women were necessary to keep the home fires burning. In any case, the world of work outside the hearth was hardly inviting. Ploughing the land required relentless physical input beyond the strength of most women; nor were they keen to exercise the broadsword. And, during a longish stretch of life, women would have their hands full with bearing and nurturing children.

In the modern world, however, getting women out of the home and into work was not at all visionary, since the thing called "work" was now largely done in centrally heated offices in front of a computer. In the push-button world men had created, physical strength was hardly ever needed, especially in the more attractive jobs. Work had been the curse of Adam, parallel with childbirth as the curse of Eve, but work now turned out to be a rather agreeable shuffling of symbols in an office full of friendship and event. It was not difficult to present this kind of work—the kind that interested the humanities graduates who largely fuelled the radical movement—as a liberation from the confinement of family life and the tedious babble of the toddler. And it fitted into a wider socialist notion that a person's value was the contribution made to the welfare of others. It had been an old dream of Zionist socialists and Bolsheviks (among others) to absorb the family into society with everyone living communally, restaurants and daycare centers replacing family arrangements, and women working each day alongside the men. Here this dream was reborn, no longer as an aspect of utopia, but as the final achievement of justice against an oppressive world.

Let us now turn to the nub of this question: why did the insurrection succeed? There was no question of the insurgents disposing of superior firepower or warrior virtues, though the tribe of radical feminists certainly displayed intrepidity of the first order. Indeed, the key point is that it was their very weakness that was the condition of their success. Even the fact that, intellectually speaking, radical feminism had nothing to say that had not been said by earlier forms of social perfectionism merely meant that the opposition had already been softened up for victimological attack. And for all the indignation about oppression, radical feminists were less a moral force than a naked interest, demanding jobs for their members, jobs carrying the same salaries and status as men. It was even commonly admitted that outstanding women had not in recent times had much trouble making their way in the academic and workaday world. The issue was to get women of merely average abilities into these positions.

In principle, the men held all the cards. They were the managers, the rulers, the professors, and the directors of enterprises. And they were the trustees of the one thing on which their civilization depended: namely, the career open to talent. No doubt there were times where prejudice prevented women from getting such and such a job, but hiring able women was something managers had long been doing. For in the early twentieth century, women resembled Jews: some people might not want to hire them but the failure to recognize ability would soon be punished by competitors stealing an advantage. These considerations soon ceased to apply once radical feminism has established the basic idea (always denied) that the program was to establish a 50 percent quota for women in all desirable jobs.

We may understand what happened by considering a similar assault on tradition mounted about the same time as the radical feminist challenge. In the 1960s the universities of the Western world were shaken by enemies who turned academic self-understanding against itself. Universities were commonly recognized as communities of scholars and students. "Well," said the radicals, "if it's a community, why are we students left out in the cold, with no power on university committees? Why are we not consulted about the content of our curricula? Why are we subject to god-professors imposing on us courses of study irrelevant

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to our needs?" Dazed and confused by these questions, which were often expressed (as is the technique) with almost samurai displays of fearsome aggression, the dons yielded. They betrayed their trust in the scholarly vocation partly from confusion and partly in order to avoid unpleasantness.

This example not only illuminates the success of radical feminism, but also reveals something of the long-term significance of these massive shifts of power. For the real threat to universities came not from students but from government. Students were a minor irritant in academic life, but governments were now bent on destroying the autonomy of the institutions of civil society. Students merely functioned as their fifth column. They had the effect of forcing universities even more into a public domain. Students wanted the academic to become the political and that was the effect they had. Before 1960 universities largely ran their own affairs. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, they had all succumbed to the state subsidies that destroyed their autonomy.

The success of the radical feminist assault on European civilization operated in a parallel fashion. "You say you believe in equal opportunities for women, but why are there no women in management, or as bishops, or as professors, or heads of big corporations?" "Why are women paid on average only *x* percent of what men get paid?" The real answers to these questions would take one deep into the role and structure of the traditional family, the difference between the things that make men and women happy, and the different relative suitability of men and women for different tasks. And such real answers would obviously have to dissolve the rather gross distinction between "men" and "women" in order to recognize that, over a wide range of activities, especially activities such as those of management, it was the individual that counted, not what in technical femspeak is called "gender."

Any recognition of these complexities dissolved before the fact that the questions being asked were rhetorical. In fact, as with student radicals, they were not questions at all, but slogans masquerading as questions. These pseudo-questions set the agenda, and the only admissible answers would be the dogmas of the doctrine: Only patriarchal oppression prevented men and women being equally represented in "positions of power."

The politics of this assault were clear enough, and they illustrate what Mancur Olsen diagnosed as the Achilles heel of democracy: that a small group passionately campaigning for specific benefits will always prevail against a large majority whose direct interests are but marginally affected. Radical feminists were a relatively small group, but their message was plausible at some level to most women, and in families men had wives and daughters whose good they wished to promote. No political party would take up all of this program, but it did electoral prospects no harm to convey a general sympathy for the cause, and once in government enthusiasts would advance legislation under the motherhood slogan of equal opportunity. Very soon a network of powerful bureaucracies was bringing radical doctrine to bear on all areas of government. The courts could be relied upon to extend their power by regulating contract and by extending the law of tort. Within a generation, the revolution had not only succeeded but also created throughout Western nations an occupying army of equal opportunity officers entrenched in personnel departments up and down the country.

And why not? It might well be demanded. Many women have great abilities and a modern society ought not to abide by conventions which may have been necessary in the past but which progress had made unnecessary. The most successful societies have been those in which women have been freest to participate widely. All of that is true and was already recognized in the advance of liberal feminism before the 1960s. The problem only arises with female quotas throughout the world of work.

In a few significant areas, however, no

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such demands are made. These areas are either where women graduates have no wish to go (rough outdoor work) or where lack of ability could lead to instant disaster, such as brain surgery or piloting commercial aircraft. Women are to be found in both, but only on the basis of ability. Universities are obviously a soft touch because the consequences of educational betrayal take decades to emerge. The effect of university quotas for "gender diversity" for example has often been to fill humanities departments with women in order to equalize numbers "distorted" (one might say) by technology and the hard sciences where even passably able women are hard to come by. Many women in the humanities departments are indeed very able, but many are not, and they have often prospered by setting up fanciful ideological courses (especially in women's studies), which can hardly pretend to be academic at all.

What however of areas where women are patently unsuited—such as the army, the police force, or fire fighting? They have in fact all been under attack because although women are unsuited to the rough work at the bottom, these areas have enviable managerial opportunities higher up. They are one more irresistible gravy train. The fire-fighting case was dramatized by the New York judicial decision that a test of fitness for the force that nearly all women failed must be discriminatory, and therefore illegal, an extension of the idea of "the rule of law" far beyond any serious meaning. This was the doctrine called "disparate impact." Similar considerations have affected women in the armed forces. Standards of entry have been lowered in order that women may qualify. One argument for so doing is that the rejected tests looked for qualities only rarely needed in the field, and that may indeed be true. Yet, the idea that soldiers are heroic figures doing something that women generally cannot do has forever been part of the self-understanding of men, even those who have never heard a shot fired in anger. A small boy inclined to cry out at the sting of iodine or the prick of an injection might be told "be a soldier." Today according to the feminist doctrine he is more likely to be told to express his feelings.

The assault of women on areas such as the church raises similar issues. In principle there is not the slightest reason why women should not take on a priestly role, and one might indeed suspect that feminists may be right in diagnosing resistance in part to an unhealthy attitude to women on the part of some of the clergy. In a pastoral role, women might well be better than men, as some women are in politics. The problem is that women priests raise very awkward questions of Christian theology. Jesus selected only male disciples. Was the son of God then merely a creature of his own culture? Here most conspicuously the entry of women changes entirely the conception of the activity and not for the better. Female clergy have done little to reverse the current decline of the church. Indeed while women as individuals have often enhanced what they have joined, the entry of women in general has seldom done much for any area previously dominated by men—except, significantly, bureaucracy.

It is the military case that is the most telling. No one doubts the inferiority of women in physical strength and sport. No football team would think of fielding women against a first-class team of men. Yet the governments of Western countries, currently feeling unthreatened by any major military power, are prepared to gamble their security on female warriors. It would not be so serious if female battalions had been formed whose performance in action could over time be tested in real situations without endangering the security of Western countries. But the feminist program is to make the army, like the rest of society, conform to an idea, and the women want to go where the men are, to be fully integrated so that when dirty and unfeminine jobs must be done, there are men to do them. Liberal feminists took the risk of setting up academic colleges of their own, but radical feminists needed to have men around. They

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wanted to be integrated. And all of this happened not because political wisdom declared it necessary for the defence of the country, nor because the electorates pushed for it, but as the result of agencies set up by partisans of a single principle of imagined justice pulling legal and bureaucratic strings.

Let us now return to the teasing question of why the male custodians of our civilization sold the pass. Some element of cowardice must certainly be recognized, because the radicals were tribal warriors making ferocious faces and stamping their feet. The defenders were white, male, and middle class, and the radicals had long been engaged in a campaign to erode the morale of each of these abstract categories. They denoted racism, sexism, and elitism respectively. Caricatured in terms of these abstractions, men found it difficult not to be written off as oppressors of women. Again, the defenders were not united. Many had been longstanding advocates of liberal feminism and from confusion believed that radical feminism was merely a rather hysterical version of classical liberalism. Retreat is a notoriously difficult maneuver to control. Each concession could be used to demand further concessions in the name of consistency. Hence the appearance in all English-speaking countries of legislation mandating equal opportunities—and who could possibly be against that? Before long, the movement had taken over the universities, many public bodies, industrial firms and, above all, the media. Quite rapidly, hiring for status-giving jobs requiring degrees had become closely circumscribed by a set of rules. The dogma was that 50 percent of all jobs belonged to women, though the reality of quotas was long denied.

There are, of course, deeper currents. One of them is that men tended to react to radical feminism with a high-minded feeling that nothing but justice, a notoriously fluid idea, should determine public policy. The balancing of justice with power, which constitutes the art of prudence, was being lost. This was a collapse of practical wisdom not difficult to explain. It is a consequence, we may guess, of the collapse of religion in the West. Christianity requires individuals to sacrifice everything for the nicest points of perfection, but it does not require that worldly institutions should do the same. But cocooned as prosperous Westerners so often are from the immediate consequences of folly, and increasingly detached from any profound understanding of the culture that had produced them, the trustees of our civilization have indulged in the most exquisite forms of self-abnegation. They were soon believing, for example, that language itself had rendered women invisible and that justice required the corrective use of the generic feminine. They were no doubt able to indulge such fancies because they had long ago picked up the idea that political correctness was really a bit of a joke, something of no practical significance in the real world. Hardly a week could pass without some piece of politically correct absurdity surfacing and being laughed over and forgotten by the men who had now lost both the will and the capacity to resist.

But beyond lie far deeper currents in Western societies. Just as the ferment in universities led rapidly to the state taking them over, so the ferment of radical feminism carries out the old Bolshevik program of creating a community of homogeneous creatures animated by some single project —in fact, the totalitarianism which, as an external assault on the walls of the West, we thought we had vanquished in battle with external enemies.

My view is, then, that the radical feminist revolution is nothing less than a destruction of our civilization. It has all happened in such a way that people have not yet realized what has happened. And there are some who might say, well, at least it has improved the condition of women. But this, I think, is a mistake. Such a view would accept the initial dichotomy, so fatal to European civilization, that men and women have separate destinies. In fact, of course, they do not. Still, it is no easy business to give an account of quite how they fit together. In-

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deed, no comprehensive theory of this relationship can be given. But many things we can confidently say. One is that women have specifically feminine qualities of their own which prevent them, as a general rule, from fitting entirely successfully into the structures men have created. No problem, say the radical feminists: let us change the structures! That can indeed be done, but something is lost. The point is that "men" put "women" (if we may generalize wildly) on a pedestal, and also despise them as weak; love and adore them in chivalrous terms, but also tend to oppress them and use them. A parallel ambivalence will be found in the way women treat men. A whole world of games and conventions has grown up around these attitudes, and they look different viewed from the barracks and from the bedroom, in the sitting room or in the shop. Radical feminism is essentially a humorless rationalism which seeks a single right attitude to be imposed on men and women alike.

There is a further point, and a more complex one. European civilization, we might say, has only stayed ahead of the game of world power because it is so remarkably innovative. It lives off ideas. Sometimes academics attempt the paradoxical business of trying to theorize innovation and creativity, but the results are inevitably banal. Creativity is essentially mysterious. Yet every so often, some movement gets into its head the idea that it has cracked the innovation code and found the formula for progress. This is what I am inclined to call the Bolshevik fallacy, because Lenin and his associates actually believed it, and the Soviet Union showed us what happens as a result of such hubris.

But the problem is wider. The whole world is now involved in the business of modernization, which means copying the mode of life constantly being transformed in Europe, and now in America—by white males, now often joined by clever individuals (both men and women) from other parts of the world. Globalization and the computer are the latest of the marvels with which our civilization has astonished the world. The point is that so far, no other civilization has been able to pick up the torch of innovative leadership. It may even be that Europeans themselves have lost the trick, or gone as far as they can go; or it may not. We simply cannot know.

What does seem to be clear, from the record so far, is that women do not have this capacity to innovate. They bring great talents to developing what Thomas Kuhn called "normal science," but they have no record of creating the "paradigm shifts" that lead in new directions. It may be, of course, that as the feminists sometimes claim, this is because they were never encouraged to engage in these activities. But to need encouragement, to depend on models to follow, is precisely not to have a capacity to innovate. It has been men who have invented things and found challenges in nature, such as climbing high mountains or sailing alone around the world. And once men have done it, women will also do it. These remain highly notable enterprises, well beyond the reach of all but a few men, but they also exemplify the fact that innovation remains largely the specialization of white males. Women can do marvellous things with a house, but they do need the house to be there in the first place.

My argument is, then, that European civilization has been attacked and conquered from within, without anyone quite realizing what has happened. We may laugh at political correctness—some people even deny that it exists—but it is a manacle around our hands. It binds us quite tightly, though some freedom must be left, because without the contribution of subjugated males, things would very rapidly decline. What political correctness amounts to in reality is a treaty of accommodation reached between the conquerors and the conquered. Women have forced their way into money and status, sometimes beyond their merits, but they have also lost a freedom (Professor Schaub calls it "leisure") that might have saved them from being formularized in

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terms of contemporary Western styles of work. Had this not happened, we might well have been saved from some of the discontents that currently afflict us. To be "socially included," as women have been in the workforce, has many practical advantages, but it involves a spiritual loss. So far the conquerors have not destroyed the geese that lay the golden eggs, so the surface of our civilization does not reveal how profound the change has been. But underneath that surface, there are currents which no one understands.

There has been a revolution, then, but a silent one. It has taken place with such stealth, and so gradually, that people have become accustomed to it little by little. I am reminded of the famous Chinese executioner whose ambition it was to be able to cut off a head so that the victim would not realize what had happened. For years he worked on his skill, and one day he cut off a head so perfectly that the victim said: "Well, when are you going to do it?" The executioner gave a beatific smile and said: "Just kindly nod."

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The perils of designer tribalism

by Roger Kimball

A generalized tolerance will be best achieved if we leave undisturbed whatever it is which constitutes the special character of particular individuals and peoples, whilst at the same time we retain the conviction that the distinctive worth of anything with true merit lies in its belonging to all humanity.
—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

[A] life without piety, including piety to the past, courts grief and does damage to the life of the living individual.
—Edward Shils

They are very gentle, and know nothing of evil.
—Christopher Columbus

In 1983, the French writer Pascal Bruckner published *Le sanglot de l'homme blanc*, an astringent, intelligently disabused attack on recent European efforts to sentimentalize the Third World. Duly translated into English a few years later as *The Tears of the White Man: Compassion as Contempt* (Free Press, 1986), the book excited a brief spark of interest among conservatives and then sank without trace into the tenebrous limbo of the out-of-print.

It was an unfortunate, and undeserved, fate. Bruckner's book is a vigorous indictment of "Third Worldism"—the odious species of romance that glorifies everything foreign, exotic, and primitive while simultaneously railing against civilization, science, and modernity. (That other social philosopher, W. S. Gilbert, was right to save a place on his famous list for "the idiot who praises with enthusiastic tone/ All centuries but this and every country but his own.")

The very power of Bruckner's indictment helps to explain its neglect. The message he brought was distinctly unwelcome music to the ears of politically correct intellectuals, whose smugness and sense of moral superiority, then as now, was inextricably bound up with the mendacities of Third Worldism and kindred specimens of emotional blackmail. (Just listen to Susan Sontag on Kosovo or Michael Ignatieff on Rwanda.) "Solidarity with oppressed peoples," Bruckner wrote,

> is above all a gigantic weapon aimed at the West. The logic of aggression is at work in Third World solidarity, and this has made it a continuation of the Cold War by other means. . . . Being non-European is enough to put one on the side of right. Being European or being supported by a European power is enough to make one suspect. The bloody messes in banana republics, and butchery of political opposition and the dictatorial lunacy by their petty chieftains are all brushed aside. Such trifles will not restrain the progress of these peoples toward socialism. What seems criminal in Cuba, Angola, and Guinea has the real purpose of washing away the far greater crime of colonialism.

Clearly, Bruckner's message is as pertinent

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today as it was in the 1980s—more so, perhaps, since the attitudes it chronicles, if often less histrionic, are today more thoroughly institutionalized, more thoroughly absorbed into established opinion.

It is worth pointing out that, unlike many Third Worldists, Bruckner had first-hand knowledge of the problems about which he wrote. Having worked as a member of the International Action Against Hunger, he animated compassion with deeds. If this tempered his romanticism, it also sharpened his vision. Bruckner did not march arm-in-arm with Jean-Paul Sartre. He was not a beneficiary of UNESCO's extortionist escapades. He did not rail against Western oppression. He did not curse the evils of colonialism. On the contrary, he understood that the West's real crime was not pursuing but rather abandoning its responsibilities as a colonial power.

Part of what makes *The Tears of the White Man* such an important book is Bruckner's sensitivity to the aerodynamics of liberal guilt. He understands what launches it, what keeps it aloft, and how we might lure it safely back to earth. He understands that the entire phenomenon of Third Worldism is fueled by the moral ecstasy of overbred guilt. Bruckner is an articulate anatomist of such guilt and its attendant deceptions and mystifications. "An overblown conscience," he points out, "is an empty conscience."

> Compassion ceases if there is nothing but compassion, and revulsion turns to insensitivity. Our "soft pity," as Stefan Zweig calls it, is stimulated, because guilt is a convenient substitute for action where action is impossible. Without the power to do anything, sensitivity becomes our main aim, the aim is not so much to do anything, as to be judged. Salvation lies in the verdict that declares us to be wrong.

The universalization—which is to say the utter trivialization—of compassion is one side of Third Worldism. Another side is the inversion of traditional moral and intellectual values. Europe once sought to bring enlightenment—literacy, civil society, modern technology—to benighted parts of the world. It did so in the name of progress and civilization. The ethic of Third Worldism dictates that yesterday's enlightenment be rebaptized as today's imperialistic oppression. For the committed Third Worldist, Bruckner points out,

> salvation consists not only in a futile exchange of influences, but in the recognition of the superiority of foreign thought, in the study of their doctrines, and in conversion to their dogma. We must take on our former slaves as our models. . . . It is the duty and in the interest of the West to be made prisoner by its own barbarians.

Whatever the current object of adulation—the wisdom of the East, tribal Africa, Aboriginal Australia, pre-Columbian America—the message is the same: the absolute superiority of Otherness. The Third Worldist looks to the orient, to the tribal, to the primitive not for what they really are but for their evocative distance from the reality of modern European society and values.

It is all part of what Bruckner calls "the enchanting music of departure." Its siren call is seductive but also supremely mendacious. Indeed, the messy reality of the primitive world—its squalor and poverty, its penchant for cannibalism, slavery, gratuitous cruelty, and superstition—are carefully edited out of the picture. In their place we find a species of Rousseauvian sentimentality. Rousseau is the patron saint of Third Worldism. "Ignoring the real human race entirely," Rousseau wrote in a passage Bruckner quotes from the *Confessions*, "I imagined perfect beings, with heavenly virtue and beauty, so sure in their friendship, so tender and faithful, that I could never find anyone like them in the real world." The beings with whom Rousseau populated his fantasy life are exported to exotic lands by the Third Worldist. As Rousseau discovered, the unreality of the scenario, far from being an impediment to moral smug-

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ness, was an invaluable asset. Reality, after all, has a way of impinging upon fantasy, clipping its wings, limiting its exuberance. So much the worse, then, for reality. As Bruckner notes, in this romance adepts "were not looking for a real world but the negation of their own. . . . An eternal vision is projected on these nations that has nothing to do with their real history."

The Australian anthropologist Roger Sandall does not mention *The Tears of the White Man* in *The Culture Cult*,[1] his new collection of essays. But his discussion is everywhere informed by the same spirit of salutary impatience. What Bruckner criticizes as Third Worldism, Sandall castigates as "romantic primitivism" and (marvelous phrase) "designer tribalism." What is romantic primitivism? In the words of Arthur O. Lovejoy and George Boas, it is "the unending revolt of the civilized against civilization." Sandall begins with a small but telling contemporary example. In 1996, the actress Lauren Hutton took her two young boys to Africa to witness a bunch of Masai warriors and their witch doctor perform a tribal dance, slaughter a cow, and drink some warm blood straight from the carcass. The whole spectacle was captured for the television audience by Ted Turner's minions. Miss Hutton loved it: according to Sandall, "Wow!" was her frequent refrain. But her young children, one of whom burst into tears, were terrified. Quite right, too. The purpose of the television show was to show that "Masai culture is just as good as Western civilization, if not better." Miss Hutton's enthusiasm was sparked by the display of "authentic" tribal passion. But her children saw the episode for what it was: a glimpse into the heart of darkness, the abyss of uncivilized barbarism.

What Sandall describes as "the culture cult" dreams of a new simplicity: a mode of existence that is somehow less encumbered, less rent by conflicting obligations than life in a modern industrialized democracy. It is a vain endeavor. The romanticization of the primitive only emphasizes one's distance from its simplicities. Romanticism in all its forms is an autumnal, retrospective phenomenon: the more fervent it is, the more it underscores the loss it laments. "It is time," Sandall writes, "to stop dreaming about going back to the land or revisiting the social arrangements of the past." Miss Hutton's happy ejaculations were prompted by such dreams. What she heard among those Masai savages as they danced about and drank blood was Pascal Bruckner's "enchanting music of departure." But it is, alas, a departure to nowhere. As Sandall observes, life is about "ever-extending complexity." To deny that is to neglect the "Big Ditch" (Ernest Gellner's term) that separates the modern world from its primitive sources. On one side of the ditch is the rule of law, near universal literacy, modern technology, and the whole panoply of liberal democratic largess. On the other side is—what? "Most traditional cultures," Sandall writes, "feature domestic repression, economic backwardness, endemic disease, religious fanaticism, and severe artistic constraints. If you want to live a full life and die in your bed, then civilization—not romantic ethnicity—deserves your thoughtful vote."

The Culture Cult is partly a brief for the Enlightenment values of universal culture and scientific rationality, partly an attack of the various atavisms that Sandall sees impeding the growth of those values. Its method is not systematic but exemplary. Sandall proceeds through a number of illustrative case studies. There are not many heroes in this book. One finds kind words for Ernest Gellner and for Karl Popper's book *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, written in the 1940s when Popper was in New Zealand. For the most part, however, *The Culture Cult* is a tour through an intellectual and moral rogues' gallery. There are suitably wry bits about anthropological fantasists like Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict, anti-industrialist utopians like

1 *The Culture Cult: Designer Tribalism and Other Essays*, by Roger Sandall; Westview Press, 214 pages, $25 paper.

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Robert Owen (founder of the New Harmony commune), and randy utopians like John Humphrey Noyes (founder of the Oneida Community). Sandall also devotes whole chapters to Isaiah Berlin and to the bizarre anti-free-market rantings of Karl Polanyi. It is useful to be reminded that Polanyi, writing in 1960, believed that "West Africa would lead the world" and that record-keeping with pebbles and rafia bags in eighteenth-century Dahomey rivaled the achievements of IBM.

Most of the figures Sandall deals with are familiar. Like Bruckner and many others before him, he singles out Rousseau and the eighteenth-century German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder as the spiritual grandparents of romantic primitivism. Rousseau contributed the hothouse emotional sentimentality, Herder the *völkisch* celebration of cultural identity at the expense of assimilation and a recognition of universal humanity. (As the French philosopher Alain Finkielkraut observed, "from the time of Plato until that of Voltaire, human diversity had come before the tribunal of universal values; with Herder the eternal values were condemned by the court of diversity.")

Sandall's real target is the assumption—common coin among anthropologists—that "culture" is a value-neutral term and that, as Claude Lévi-Strauss put it in 1951, one had to "fight against ranking cultural differences hierarchically." In his book *The Savage Mind*—which argues that there is no such thing as the savage, as distinct from the civilized, mind—Lévi-Strauss spoke blithely of the "so-called primitive." (It is significant that Lévi-Strauss should have idolized Rousseau: "our master and our brother," "of all the *philosophes*, [the one who] came nearest to being an anthropologist.") One of Sandall's main tasks in *The Culture Cult* is to convince us that what Lévi-Strauss dismissed as "so-called" is really "well-called." Sandall does not mention William Henry's *In Defense of Elitism* (1994)—another unfairly neglected book—but his argument in *The Culture Cult* reinforces Henry's accurate, if politically incorrect, observation that

> the simple fact [is] that some people are better than others—smarter, harder working, more learned, more productive, harder to replace. Some ideas are better than others, some values more enduring, some works of art more universal. Some cultures, though we dare not say it, are more accomplished than others and therefore more worthy of study. Every corner of the human race may have something to contribute. That does not mean that all contributions are equal. . . . It is scarcely the same thing to put a man on the moon as to put a bone in your nose.

Henry's quip about the bone in the nose elicited the expected quota of outrage from culture-cultists. But the outrage missed the serious and, ultimately, the deeply humane point of the observation. What Sandall calls romantic primitivism puts a premium on quaintness, which it then embroiders with the rhetoric of authenticity. There are two casualties of this process. One is an intellectual casualty: it becomes increasingly difficult to tell the truth about the achievements and liabilities of other cultures. The other casualty is a moral, social, and political one. Who suffers from the expression of romantic primitivism? Not the Lauren Huttons and Claude Lévi-Strausses of the world. On the contrary, the people who suffer are the objects of the romantic primitive's compassion, "respect," and pretended emulation. Sandall asks:

> Should American Indians and New Zealand Maoris and Australian Aborigines be urged to preserve their traditional cultures at all costs? Should they be told that assimilation is wrong? And is it wise to leave them entirely to their own devices?

Sandall is right that the answers, respectively, are No, No, and No: "The best chance of a good life for indigenes is the same as for you and me: full fluency and literacy in English, as much math as we can handle, and a job."

This is a truth that was broadly recognized at least through the 1950s. With the

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failure of colonialism, however, came a gigantic failure of nerve. (It might be said, in fact, that the failure of colonialism *was* a gigantic failure of nerve.) More and more, confusion replaced confidence, and with confusion came the pathologies of guilt.

> Since the folly of locking up native peoples in their old-time cultures is obvious, but it is tactless to say so, governments have everywhere resorted to the rhetoric of "reconciliation." This pretends that the problem is psychological and moral: rejig the public mind, ask leading political figures to adopt a contrite demeanor and apologize for the sins of history, and all will be well. Underlying this is the assumption that we are all on the same plain of social development, divided only by misunderstanding.

But this assumption, Sandall emphasizes, "is false." And it was recognized as false by governments everywhere until quite recently. Around 1970, the big change set in. Then, instead of attempting to help primitives enter the modern world, we were enjoined to admire them and their (suitably idealized) way of life. As Sandall observes, "the effect on indigenes of romanticizing their past has been devastating."

> If your traditonal way of life has no alphabet, no writing, no books, and no libraries, and yet you are continually told that you have a culture which is "rich," "complex," and "sophisticated," how can you realistically see your place in the scheme of things? If all such hyperbole were true, who would need books or writing? Why not hang up a "Gone Fishing" sign and head for the beach? I might do that myself. In Australia, policies inspired by the Culture Cult have brought the illiterization of thousands of Aborigines whose grandparents could read and write.

The statistics are grim. Between 1965 and 1975, Sandall reports, Aborigines arrived at one college with sixth-grade reading levels; in 1990, after primary education had been handed over to local Aboriginal communities, that had fallen to third grade. Today most Aborigines arrive at the college in question almost completely illiterate.

This social disaster was the result of specific political policies. But the policies themselves were the result of a moral attitude, one that many anthropologists have actively nurtured. In part, the attitude is a reflection of the Lévi-Straussian "non-hierarchical" view of culture: the view which denies that there are important distinctions to be made between *la pensée sauvage* and the mind, for example, of Claude Lévi-Strauss. In part, what we might call the "anthropological attitude" is a coefficient of the idea—also fostered by Lévi-Strauss, among many others—that culture is at bottom a "narrative," a product of "social construction." And the results of *that* development—corrosive skepticism, blasé nihilism, irresponsible relativism—have helped to place anthropology in the intellectual slum wherein it now molders. "For more than twenty years," Sandall writes, "anthropologists have written about constructing reality as if the world and everything in it were mere artifact, about building identity as if any old self-glamourizing fiction will do, about creating the past as an enterprise more exciting than history, about inventing tradition as if traditions were as changeable as store windows." "As if," indeed. Sandall is very good on all this, and I only wish that he had devoted more space to discussing the work of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who is mentioned only in passing. He is one of the most influential and oleaginous proponents of the all-is-narrative, all-cultures-are-equal position now writing. He is a real postmodern culture-cultist who would have benefited—well, *we* would have benefited—from a closer look.

It is part of the ethos of designer tribalism to foist all of one's own attitudes and longings onto the apparently blank canvas of whatever primitive populace happens to be in vogue at the moment. To some extent, this is simply a matter of ignorance, as illustrated, for example, by Christopher Co-

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lumbus's report that the people he discovered "are very gentle, and know nothing of evil." But the culture cultist supplements ignorance with heavy helpings of ideology and idealization. He looks at an exotic culture and, lo and behold, he finds himself looking into a flattering mirror. This is one reason that natives always seem to be non-smoking, vegetarian, sex-worshipping, drug-taking, eco-conscious, progressive-thinking pacifists—according, anyway, to the press releases distributed by the culture cultists.

Sandall speaks in this context of anthropology's tendency to "normalize the primitive while treating civilization as aberrant." Consider the Maoris. In contemporary New Zealand, Sandall notes, one finds "a miscellaneous army of teachers, academics, government servants, clergy, radical lawyers, progressive judges, journalists, and numerous other *bien pensants* promot[ing] the revival of traditional Maori culture even more fanatically than the Maori do themselves." He cites an Anglican priest who rails against the "monocultural grip on all our institutions" that British colonialism supposedly still exerts (if only!), and cites various teachers who wish to return the education of Maori children to the tribes. In the background is a rose-tinted view of the Maoris as a peace-loving, ecologically conscious, spiritually delicate people who have been abused for two centuries by hard-bitten, materialistic Europeans.

In fact, the ecological record of the Maoris would not win any plaudits from the Sierra Club. Shortly after paddling up to New Zealand in their canoes eight-hundred years ago, the Maori indiscriminately burned huge swathes of forest. They also decimated the wildlife. Actually, "decimate" is far too weak a word. Within a short time, Sandall notes, some 30 percent of the bird life on New Zealand had become extinct thanks to the depredations of the Maoris. All twelve species of moa, for example, a large, flightless bird without natural predators before the Maori arrived, became extinct some six-hundred years ago. According to Sandall, it was perhaps the fastest megafaunal extinction ever recorded. Not that the Maori were particular about where they got their protein. Divided into numerous tribes, they were incessantly at war. Prisoners were routinely baked and eaten. But all of this is papered over. And even as the Maori past is systematically distorted and rewritten, so their future is jeopardized by government policies that, in the name of "bi-culturalism" and preserving tribal customs, dooms its beneficiaries to a life of second-class citizenship.

Sandall is at his best when puncturing over-inflated reputations. Many of his subjects, it is true, have been repeatedly punctured before. Somehow, though, the gas keeps seeping back in, so new puncturings are always in order. For example, it is pretty well known today that Margaret Mead's book *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928) should be filed under fiction, not anthropology. Mead herself acknowledged that in populating the South Seas with sexual libertines she was pushing speculation "to the limit of acceptability." But Mead's book, along with Ruth Benedict's investigation of the pueblo life of the Zuni in *Patterns of Culture* (1934, another work of what Sandall calls "didactic semifiction"), was immensely influential. Both were part of the tsunami that legitimized "the bohemian counterculture of Greenwich Village," first in the universities and then in the 1960s in the culture at large. We cannot be too frequently reminded that what was presented as anthropology is really a species of fantasy.

The Culture Cult is a valuable addition to the literature of common sense. It goes some distance in doing for the discipline of anthropology what Keith Windschuttle's book *The Killing of History* did for the discipline of history. That is to say, it exposes the reign of ideology and mystification—in an academic pursuit, first of all, but also as it has spilled over into the culture at large. If Sandall's book is finally less effective than *The Killing of History*, that is largely for two reasons. In the first place, it is more miscel-

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laneous. The chapter on Isaiah Berlin, for example, contains some valuable observations—anything that lets a bit of air out of that inflated reputation is welcome—but it offers a discussion that is a tangent to Sandall's discussion of the culture cult.

It must also be said that *The Culture Cult* does not operate at the same intellectual level as *The Killing of History.* One of the things that distinguishes Windschuttle's book is its patient trek through the historical record. If Michel Foucault said something silly about asylums in the Middle Ages, Windschuttle went to the trouble of reading through Foucault and then through a number of independent sources in order to establish what actually happened. Sandall's discussion tends to be much more second-hand. His treatment of Rousseau, which relies heavily on Paul Johnson's discussion in *Intellectuals*, is a case in point. I have an appropriately low opinion of Rousseau's character and believe there can be no doubt that his influence on politics and education has been almost wholly malign. But Rousseau was more than the sum of his failings, more than an "interesting madman" (as one of his mistresses described him), and his writings about the state of nature, however preposterous, were more than an expression of his paranoia and resentment against Paris.

I agree wholeheartedly with Sandall that "cultures differ profoundly, and these differences have profound effects." I also share his judgment that the future, if we are lucky, belongs to the values that made Europe the economic, political, scientific leader of the world. Sandall is right also to contrast "the wealth-producing cultures of Western Europe and the poverty-producing traditional cultures admired by romantic primitivism." Nevertheless, his simple opposition of "culture versus civilization" needs to be taken with a grain of salt. For one thing, his hunt for romantic primitives turns up some distinctly unlikely candidates. For example, in "Civilization and Its Malcontents," Sandall tells us that T. S. Eliot and Ludwig Wittgenstein "were drawn to the all-inclusive anthropological concept of culture, something which is the antithesis of High Culture, and which would undermine its status and fatally weaken its defense." I'll leave Wittgenstein to one side, except to say that anyone who can dismiss the author of *Philosophical Investigations* as endorsing a world of "groupthink, grouptalk, group action, all cozily packaged in a *Gemeinschaft* world" is not a reliable guide to the philosopher's work.

And Eliot? Sandall quotes (but cites the wrong page) Eliot's statement, from the appendix of *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, that by "culture" he means "first of all what the anthropologists mean." But to think on that account that Eliot endorses the non-hierarchical, all-cultures-are-equal view that Sandall attacks is to completely mistake Eliot's purpose. On the very same page as the passage Sandall quotes, Eliot observed that "there are of course higher cultures and lower cultures, and the higher cultures in general are distinguished by differentiation of function." Reflecting on his work at *The Criterion*, Eliot spoke of his colleagues' "common concern for the highest standards of both thought and expression, . . . a common curiosity and openness of mind to new ideas" and "our common responsibility . . . to preserve our common culture uncontaminated by political influences." Sandall's discription of Eliot's "somnambulistic ruminations" is itself a piece of somnambulism, coaxed into action, perhaps, by too rigid and superficial a distinction between culture and civilization. The sociologist Edward Shils was certainly no enemy of what Sandall champions as "civilization." But in his book *Tradition* (dedicated, incidentally, to the spirits of Max Weber and Eliot), Shils observed that "a mistake of great historical significance has been made in modern times in the construction of a doctrine which treated traditions as the detritus of the forward movement of society." If romantic primitivism is an enemy of civilization, so too is the view that piety toward the past is always an impediment to progress.

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Gardens for the sleeves

by Eric Ormsby

In A.D. 751, not quite thirty years after the Prophet Muhammad had made his epochal flight, or *hijrah*, from Mecca to Medina, and less than twenty years after his death, the conquering Muslim armies in the East defeated the Chinese governor Kao Sien-chih with his Turkish troops at Talas, in what is now Kazakhstan. The victory was momentous not only because it checked Chinese expansion in Central Asia but also because the spoils of war included Chinese paper-makers. As the great Islamicist and historian S. D. Goitein used to remark, "The Arabs learned how to make paper from the Chinese, and they haven't stopped covering it since." This jocular remark is an understatement; the profusion and variety of Arabic literature are mind-boggling. The standard history by the German scholar Carl Brockelmann (known to his colleagues as *der Zettelpascha* or "the index-card Pasha," because of his brimming files) consists of five massive volumes of exceedingly fine type; this is now being supplemented by the continuing history (it has reached ten volumes, with more to come) of the Turkish historian Fuat Sezgin.

Classical Arabic literature is a learned literature, in this similar to such traditions as the Sanskrit or the Hebrew; it was not uncommon for an *adîb*, or litterateur, to master several disciplines and to write authoritative treatises in each. In addition to such displays of erudition it went without saying that a scribe or scholar, a *kâtib* or an *'âlim*, would not only have hundreds or thousands of verses by heart, but would be an accomplished poet and calligrapher as well. Even in periods considered "decadent," a polymath like the Egyptian Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti, who died in 1505, could produce over 336 separate works, many of them compendious, multi-volume treatises. Of course, *adab*, the word for "literature" in Arabic, also denotes "refinement" and "cultivation." The term is conceived broadly and comprises not only poetry and belles-lettres, but also fables, proverbs and jokes, history (tribal and dynastic), genealogy and geography, popular philosophy and ethics, oratory and table talk, not to mention several sciences of language, from phonetics through grammar, prosody, and rhetoric to philology proper; in short, all that an eighth- or ninth-century sophisticate was expected to know. Given such abundance, how can an interested outsider even gain a toehold in such a tradition? The difficulty is compounded by the fact that most translations from Classical Arabic, and especially of poetry, are stilted, prolix, bombastic, fusty and often inadvertently hilarious to read—when not simply unreadable. There are exceptions but they are few; indeed, if a new *Stuffed Owl* were to be compiled of bad translations from the Arabic, it would run to several plump, and hooting, volumes.

The English novelist and Arabist Robert Irwin has now ventured intrepidly into this

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forbidding terrain and produced an ambitious and surprisingly enjoyable anthology, drawn from all periods of Arabic literature and accompanied by his own elegant commentary.[1] As might be expected from the author of the wonderful *The Arabian Nights: A Companion* or the elegant erotic novel *Prayer-cushions of the Flesh*—a small masterpiece—the results are charming, even for those numbed by the bizarre and often incoherent effusions of previous editor-translators. Irwin writes with wit and precision; his introductions and comments are marvels of apposite annotation, and he enlivens them with funny or pungent or scabrous anecdotes and citations by a huge array of Arabic authors from the sixth century to the sixteenth (Irwin concludes with his own superb translation of the little-known Mamluk author Ibn Zunbul). For example, Irwin notes that the Christian Arab poet al-Akhtal, who died sometime around 710, "described the effect of wine in these terms: 'It creeps through the frame like ants crawling through drifted sand.'" Or that the magnificent ninth-century prose writer al-Jâhiz (his name means "the goggle-eyed") "used to pay the owners of bookshops to be locked up in their premises at night so that he could read the stock. It is reported that he was killed when an avalanche of books collapsed on top of him." (A fate that befell Orientalists as well: the prolific nineteenth-century German poet and translator of Arabic and Persian Friedrich Rückert met his end in his ninetieth year when his bookshelves toppled over onto him as he was perusing an Ethiopic grammar.) Sometimes the passing citations are splendid, as in the remarks on the ocean attributed to the conqueror of Egypt, the great general 'Amr ibn al-'As, and which reflect the desert-dweller's perennial dread of the sea:

> The sea is a boundless expanse, whereon great ships look tiny specks; nought but the heavens above and waters beneath; when calm the sailor's heart is broken; when tempestuous, his senses reel. Trust it little, fear it much. Man at sea is an insect on a splinter, now engulfed, now scared to death.

An astute eye for the felicitous quotation is also much in evidence in Irwin's selections from existing translations. He ferrets out quite pleasing passages even from otherwise unpalatable versions; indeed, the value of his anthology lies as much in his judicious assortment of translations as in his own keen comments. This is a tacit virtue, perhaps best appreciated by those who have had to slog through the existing translations. Rather slyly, using quotations as a kind of medicinal honey to sweeten his sometimes astringent facts (as an Arab author might have said), Irwin situates his literary figures firmly within their own times; because of this, his anthology also serves as a succinct running history of medieval Islam. At moments history and literature converge, as in Irwin's compact account of al-Hajjaj ibn Yusuf, the draconian Umayyad governor of Iraq. Irwin points out that this bloodthirsty governor began his career as a grammar-school teacher, a fact he wittily uses to explain al-Hajjaj's ruthlessness, in matters of state as of grammar (al-Hajjaj is credited with inventing the diacritical signs that denote vowels in Arabic script and which brought greater precision to the written language). The speech al-Hajjaj delivered upon first arriving, in disguise, as governor in the mutinous city of al-Kufah became a set piece anthologized repeatedly for its murderous eloquence. Al-Hajjaj ascended the *minbar*, or pulpit, drew back his head-covering and delivered a harangue which begins:

> O people of al-Kufah! I see before me heads ripe for the harvest and the reaper; and verily I am the man to do it. Already I see the blood between the turbans and the beards. . . . You Iraquis are rebels and traitors, the dregs of dregs! I am not a man to be frightened by an

1 *Night & Horses & the Desert: An Anthology of Classical Arabic Literature*, edited by Robert Irwin; Overlook Press, 480 pages, $40.

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> inflated bag of skin, nor need anyone think to squeeze me like dry figs! . . . Therefore, beware, for it is in my power to strip you like bark from the tree, . . . to beat you as we beat camels which wander away from the caravans, and grind you to powder as one grinds wheat between mill stones! . . . I am Hajjaj ibn Yusuf, a man who keeps his promises, and when I shave I cut the skin!

The tirade, laced with such inflammatory expletives as "you sons of whores!," continues at some length and in much the same vein; it has lost none of its force for Arab readers some 1300 years after the event (indeed, al-Hajjaj's imprecations might be useful for Colin Powell to recite when next he deals with Saddam Hussein).

Quite properly, Irwin begins his selection with the pre-Islamic period and the great early odes. To Muslims, this is the *Jâhilîyah* or "time of ignorance" (that is, ignorance of Islam), and yet it was also the period in which the Arabic language was at its purest and most eloquent. This is not mere cultural or linguistic chauvinism but has a theological underpinning: the language of the early poems was also the language of the Qur'ân, itself the literal speech of God (the word *qur'ân*, probably an early borrowing from Syriac, means "recitation"). Though resolutely pagan, the early Bedouin poetry thus enjoyed a formidable reflected luster and such a sacrosanct position that when much later, in the 1920s, the great Egyptian writer Taha Hussein cast doubt upon the authenticity of the pre-Islamic poems, riots ensued, and he had to withdraw his book and drastically revise it. For strict Muslims, to say that the scripture represents God's word means that it is both co-eternal with Him and uncreated; indeed, in such reverence is the scriptural language held that there were intense early debates over the status of the written letters in calligraphed copies and even over the nature of the words as they took articulate shape in the mouths of reciters. For some believers an old and tattered Qur'ân might not be routinely discarded; rather, the pages were steeped to remove the ink which was then drunk for its supernatural virtues.

Since there are unfortunately few if any good translations of the early poetry into English (other languages, such as German, have fared better), Irwin has had the intelligent idea of offering excerpts from more than one translation of certain celebrated poems. This is important not only because of passing trends in translation but also because of the nature of the original language. Classical Arabic, a kind of *koiné* spoken natively by no one, early acquired multiple accretions of meaning to which philologists, professional reciters and memorizers, along with the poets themselves, often added new, abstruse or even fabricated meanings. This gave rise to the old joke that every word in Arabic denotes some primary signification, its contrary, some part of a camel, and a sexual act. (Anyone thumbing through certain of the older lexicons could be forgiven for coming to this conclusion. It was only quite recently, in fact, that scientific lexicography of Classical Arabic was established and that many "ghost words" began to be winnowed out.) Because of these multiple possibilities of meaning, translations often diverge radically from one another.

Certain early poems remain among the principal glories of Arabic literature, and none more so than the so-called "suspended ode" (*mu'allaqah*) of the wandering king Imru' al-Qays who died around A.D. 540, murdered, according to legend, by a poisoned shirt given to him by the Byzantine emperor. This poem, along with six others, was supposedly written in letters of gold and suspended above the Ka'ba in Mecca, then still a pagan city. No wholly successful translation of the ode yet exists in English but Irwin gives one valiant attempt in full, that of the English Orientalist A. J. Arberry. (Though I now find it embarrassing to admit, it was Arberry's translation which led me, over thirty years ago, to the study of Arabic.) Here is a representative excerpt:

> Oh yes, many a fine day I've dallied with the

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white ladies,
and especially I call to mind a day at Dára Juljul,
and the day I slaughtered for the virgins my riding beast
(and how marvellous was the dividing of its loaded saddle),
and the virgins went on tossing its hacked flesh about
and the frilly fat like fringes of twisted silk.

A food-fight in the sand-dunes among rambunctious virgins would probably not score high among erotic escapades for most modern readers. But the gulf proves even deeper. The early nomadic ideal of feminine beauty could be disconcertingly at variance with our own. Imru' al-Qays compares a beloved's fingers to "sand-worms of Zaby" or tooth-picks "of *ishil*-wood," and he admires how "tenderly plump" her ankles are.

Still, the problems with Arberry's translation, as with those by other translators, lie in the musty archaicisms of his language. Classical Arabic is a conservative language, in that it stubbornly retains many features (such as a dual in nouns and verbs to designate pairs of things or concerted action by two persons) that have vanished from such near relatives as Hebrew; moreover, there are many words, conjunctions in particular, which can only be literally rendered in English by such obsolete expressions as "verily" and "forsooth." Needless to say, these usages impart unintentionally comic accents to otherwise solemn texts. Sometimes, of course, through no fault of their own, translators fall prey to the semantic shifts of English; for example, Arberry has Imru' al-Qays describe his steed as a "gay bay" (the crass rhyme is Arberry's own flourish), and he uses a verb in cloistered innocence of its other connotations: "Many's the water-skin of all sorts of folk I have slung/ by its strap over my shoulder, as humble as can be, and humped it." True, Imru' al-Qays was a libidinous rascal but even he never went that far! Bravely, Irwin includes extracts from the versions of other translators, such as Herbert Howarth and Ibrahim Shukrullah, who resolutely strain to make the sixth-century bard more hip but still find themselves penning such lines as "There were good days with the clover-smelling wenches." Surprisingly, the best translation remains that of the late Victorian British army officer Sir Charles Lyall who made the almost demented attempt not only to render the early poems with scrupulous accuracy but also to do so in the original meters (there are fifteen or sixteen in traditional prosody, and many variations). Classical Arabic, in this like Greek or Latin, is a quantitative language and the lengths of vowels are crucial to the effect of the poetry, but, as generations of English poets from Elizabethan times to Tennyson, Robert Bridges, and Swinburne have found, vowel-length is almost impossible to reproduce in English which tends to stress rather than to lengthen syllables. (Tennyson used to boast that he knew the quantities of all English words except for "scissors," but the results prove otherwise.) Still, Lyall often succeeds, or at least comes close; this is in *tawíl*, the "long" meter:

The clouds cast their burden down on the broad plain of al-Ghabit,
as a trader from al-Yaman unfolds bales from his store;
and the topmost crest on the morrow of al-Mujaimir's cairn
was heaped with the flood-borne wrack like wool on a distaff wound.

Irwin has a good eye as well for the curious and eccentric passage, with which Arabic literature abounds. The classical authors loved to digress; al-Jahiz, for example, ranges, in Irwin's inventory, over "cripples, mispronunciations, lizards, the caliphate, robbers, the culture of bureaucrats, book-collecting, the attributes of God, schoolmasters, Christianity, mules, Turks, pedlars' slang, types of singers, capital cities and jokes." One of Irwin's more unusual *trouvailles* is from the *Book of Poisons* by the mysterious Ibn Wahshiyya, a Nabatean reputed to have been a magician (Irwin gives

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his name, incorrectly, as Ibn Washshiya). Among Ibn Wahshiyya's charms is a Chinese stone called "marcasite" which "causes the man who sees it to laugh himself to death." This useful compendium also contains "directions for making killer castanets, as well as (rather revolting) instructions for producing a human-headed cow, the mere sight of which will infallibly kill its beholder." Arabic literature is full of such curiosities. Not mentioned by Irwin, for example, is a witty prose work by the aforementioned al-Suyuti in which a roster of professionals—a lawyer, a grammarian, a doctor, a theologian, et al.—each graphically describes his wedding night in the technical jargon of his profession.

Night & Horses & the Desert—the title is taken from a famous line by the tenth-century poet al-Mutanabbi—is arranged thematically and in broad chronological order. After the chapter on the early poetry, Irwin turns to the Qur'ân which, though not "literature" as such, underlies most subsequent writing in Arabic. In a mere eleven pages, he provides what is perhaps the best concise account of that strange and incomparable book. The fact that the scripture is often known quite simply as "the Book" (*kitâb* in Arabic) may give the outsider some small sense of the unique prestige in which books were held in traditional Islamic culture. The Qur'ân itself exists primordially on the "Preserved Tablet" (*al-lawh al-mahfûz*) in Heaven and thus represents in some supernal way the archetypal exemplar of all books, though of course no other book may be compared with it. This had enormous implications for later Islamic culture in which a reverence for books was so deeply rooted as to be inextinguishable. By "books" I actually mean manuscripts. Indeed, when printing from movable type was introduced into Iran in the late eighteenth century, it was quickly rejected in favor of lithographed volumes that reproduced handwritten prototypes. Only in Turkey, thanks to the ingenuity of an eighteenth-century Jewish convert to Islam, one Ibrahim Muteferrika, the "Gutenberg" of the Islamic world, did printing as we know it begin to take hold.

Irwin proceeds in five superb chapters to give a sense of Classical Arabic literature during several crucial epochs, beginning with the court culture of the Umayyads and 'Abbasids to the influx of scientific and philosophical translations from the Greek via the medium of Syriac in the ninth century and ending with the Mamluks in sixteenth-century Egypt. On the topic of panegyric poetry, much loved by Arab bards for pecuniary as well as aesthetic motives, Irwin wittily notes that "it is not easy to bully an English reader into liking medieval Arabic panegyric. Like an advertising jingle, it has almost certainly been written to extort money from its target audience." In my opinion, it is not so much the blatant insincerity of such panegyric that repels as the astonishingly elaborate formal conceits which it often necessitates; there is simply nothing in English or American poetry to equal the extravagant delight of Classical Arab poets in rhetorical and imagistic and prosodic intricacy.

In a short review I cannot render full justice to Irwin's accomplishment. Even the specialist will find much of great interest here. Thus, Irwin does not focus exclusively on obvious masterpieces but searches out the byways; his inclusion of the "Mantle Poem" of the Egyptian mystic al-Bûsîrî in a clear English translation is but one instance. This long incantatory poem is still used throughout the Muslim world as a healing charm, the text of the poem itself laid over the eyes of the sufferer. It is a beautiful poem that yet serves purposes other than the merely aesthetic, and it was brilliant of Irwin to think to include it. So, too, his chapter on Andalusia, where an Umayyad dynasty, banished from its Syrian roots, survived amid splendor for over three-hundred years, effects a marvelous synthesis of numerous sources. Thus, to show how Andalusia both mimicked and strove to surpass its eastern rivals in Baghdad, Irwin introduces the fascinating but little-known

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figure of Ziryab, musician, poet, and courtier, who came to Cordoba to seek his fortune and founded an entire school of Andalusian music which still can be heard in northern Morocco; as Irwin notes, "Ziryab added a fifth string to the lute and pioneered the use of eagles' talons as plectra." This charismatic entertainer also promoted new styles of clothing, new coiffures, and even ushered in the use of underarm deodorants "made from litharge or lead monoxide." Ziryab's influence extended to the table; he introduced to Spain not only asparagus and "fried meatballs cooked with coriander" but also crystal goblets in place of "vulgar gold and silver." Irwin's lovingly detailed account of such tastemakers creates a vibrant context for his literary divagations and affords us a vivid and almost pungent sense of a vanished realm. For it is not only translations that sadly betray their Classical Arabic originals but our vast general ignorance of the entire milieu in which those masterpieces emerged. With his suavely worn learning and his novelist's skill, Irwin gracefully resurrects a world buried far more profoundly by strata of culture and linguistic differences than many another by mere dust and age.

In our own unfortunate age of "virtual" libraries (that is, to be blunt about it, no libraries) and "paperless" books (again, no books), it is salubrious and refreshing to discover that we may still share certain bedrock values with individuals separated from us by immense crevasses of time and custom. Arabic culture is a bookish one, and even today the book itself retains its unique prestige. Over a thousand years ago al-Jahiz could eulogize books thus:

> have you ever seen a garden that will go into a man's sleeve, an orchard you can take on your lap, a speaker who can speak of the dead and yet be the interpreter of the living? Where else will you find a companion who sleeps only when you are asleep, and speaks only when you wish him?

Where else, indeed, but in such an enchanted, and enchanting, volume as Robert Irwin, with adroit grace and exuberant erudition, has now given us?

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Discovering La Rochefoucauld

by Theodore Dalrymple

I remember the day I discovered La Rochefoucauld; or rather, to put it the way round that is now de rigueur among historians of the Spanish conquest of America, the day La Rochefoucauld discovered me. I was twelve years old, and I had been sent to the local barbers for my two-weekly haircut. I had half a crown pocket money to spend, and I was in the habit of buying books that were slightly too difficult for me to read. Those were the last days in British history when people wanted to appear cleverer, instead of stupider, than they were.

Next door to the barbershop was a newsagent that had a small revolving rack of books. How can I put this without sounding absurdly nostalgic or golden-ageist? You could go to a lot of newsagents in England nowadays without finding a copy of La Rochefoucauld. Anyway, this Penguin Classic, whose bright green border I remember vividly, suited my purposes admirably; a slender volume, it offered a high ratio of intellectual kudos to number of pages.

I took it with me to the barbers. Sometimes I had to wait a long time for my haircut because a small boy was always at the end of the queue, no matter how many people arrived after him. I didn't mind, so long as I had a book with me, and I have since learned that there is no surer way of irritating the officious than contentedly to read while they make you wait.

I didn't much like haircuts, but I liked the barbers who worked in the shop. I admired the way they sharpened their cutthroat razors on the thick leather straps attached by metal rings to the basin stands. I admired the tauromachian flourish with which, at the end of a haircut, they removed the white bib they had placed around their customers' necks. I was intrigued by the little mauve and purple envelopes propped up against the mirrors, that my older brother eventually told me contained condoms. I wasn't much the wiser for this information, however, because in those days they still taught you in school to recite Wordsworth ("Earth has not anything to show more fair," etc.) rather than how to slip prophylactics over bananas—a skill that, oddly enough, has not proved incompatible with an enormous rise in the number of teenage pregnancies.

The barbers also ran an illegal operation: a betting shop. In those days, off-course betting was still illegal in England—how primitive we were!—and gamblers had to resort to a network of clandestine bookies. The barbers would rush to the phone when it rang—leaving their customers half shaved or their scalps still wrapped, turban-like, in a steaming white towel—and speak a strange argot, which even now I do not fully understand, into the receiver, *sotto voce* in case the mirrors had ears. Two to one against, three to one on, a fiver each way: I could have asked an uncle of mine, who dissipated a small fortune on what some have called the sport of kings, but he called the gee-gees, for the meaning of these ar-

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cane phrases, but I never did. I nonetheless sensed that something mildly disreputable, though not truly wicked, was taking place; I also realized also that these men, who wrote nothing down, were possessed of formidable memories. They remembered everything, as preliterate people remember epics and their genealogy. The barbershop was not a place in which I ever expected to have one of the formative literary experiences of my life.

Disregarding copies of *The Sporting Life* and *The Racing Times* left on the chairs for the entertainment of waiting customers, I started to read the maxims of the good duke. I was captivated at once, and it struck me as being not in the least strange that a failed intriguer at the court of Louis XIII and vanquished *Frondeur* should have had something to say to a suburban London schoolboy almost exactly three centuries later. It didn't strike me as strange because at the time I knew nothing of French history other than the military defeats that the French seemed invariably to suffer at the hands of my own dear nation; they had a walk-on part in history, as it were, which was to be smartly and patriotically biffed on the nose. I learnt about the various Louis only two years later: my first school essay on that subject beginning with a stern reprimand to the Sun King. "Louis XIV," I wrote, "was not a good king." *A bas Versailles!*

I didn't know much about life, but I already knew enough about myself to know that La Rochefoucauld had me in mind when he wrote his maxims. But how, I wondered, did he know so much about me almost three centuries before I was even born? It was uncanny, as if he had not only been watching me closely, but had also entered my brain and read my guilty thoughts—or rather, my thoughts that ought to have been guilty. His maxims exerted an almost physical effect on me, like a sharpened bicycle spoke pushed straight into my solar plexus.

There was another strange thing about them; they came with the force of revelation, and yet at the same time they said things that I had known all along. How was this paradox to be explained? How could something be totally new and utterly familiar at the same time? The answer could only be that the human mind was not as straightforward as I had supposed it to be.

When La Rochefoucauld wrote that "There is in the misfortunes of our friends something not entirely unpleasing," and followed it up by asking "How can we expect anyone to keep our secret if we cannot keep it ourself?," he must surely have been thinking of my friendship, apparently close, with Charlie H.

Charlie H. was taller than I, but what he had in superior height he made up for in lack of intelligence. I was therefore able to achieve over him the easy ascendancy that is the cynosure of lazy young minds such as mine. He regarded me with something approaching awe, considering every word of mine to be both wise and true. Since I knew myself to be less than invariably truthful, this provided me with a golden opportunity to test the outer limits of human, or at least of puerile, credulity.

One day I told Charlie H. that I was in possession of the most valuable stamp in the world (we all collected stamps, and to this day my visual images of Eva Perón and President Hindenburg are purely philatelic). I told him that I was not, alas, in a position to let him have it for nothing, but he could have it for sixpence: at today's exchange rate, slightly less than 3.75 cents, though then still enough to buy a bar of chocolate.

I remember the stamp still. It was of recent issue, and of low denomination in Mozambican escudos, being in design a tropical butterfly on a pale turquoise-green ground. It was what the stamp catalogues of the day, rather sniffily, described as "multicolored"—philatelic multicoloration being a comparatively recent and regrettably vulgar innovation that started with the independence issues by Ghana in 1957. The garish African colors soon spread round the world, replacing the restrained and tasteful monochromes that until then had reigned su-

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preme. At the time, I thought the multicoloration of stamps a philatelic liberation, but now, though I am no longer interested in such matters, I see that I was mistaken. What youth considers liberation, maturity considers tasteless excess.

Charlie H. took the bait and meekly handed over his sixpence. I had done my homework: according to the catalogue, in which the prices were at least double what any of us would pay, the stamp was worth a halfpenny. It was the very implausibility of my offer that had prompted me maliciously to make it, and the greater my victim's gullibility, the cleverer I felt myself to be by contrast with him. As La Rochefoucauld says, a clever man would often be at a loss without the company of fools.

I do not know whether Charlie H. ever discovered my swindle: if so, perhaps another of La Rochefoucauld's maxims might have brought him some comfort. It is more shameful, says the duke, to distrust one's friends than to be deceived by them. And a little while later, Charlie H. took me aside in the playground and said that he had a terrible secret that he wanted to reveal to me, and to me alone. I therefore willingly swore myself to a secrecy that I knew even as I uttered the words that I should not keep. Charlie H. told me that his father was in prison.

With what secret joy I heard these words wrung from the depths of my companion's soul! Naturally, I spoke sympathetically and adopted a grave facial expression: for, as La Rochefoucauld says, we are all strong enough to bear the misfortunes of others. I couldn't wait to spread the news. But if I had been asked—before I read the *Maxims*—whether knowledge of Charlie H.'s terrible secret had given me pleasure, I should have denied it vehemently, and believed my own denial, though at the same time knowing perfectly well that I was lying. Here was the solution to the Rochefoucauldian paradox, that he said things that were both deeply revelatory and already well-known, but it was his unflinching courage in acknowledging the facts of human nature that allowed him (and us, if we read him aright) to overcome the double consciousness that causes a man to know and know not, to behave badly and think well of himself. La Rochefoucauld, indeed, offers us a genuine liberation, namely from humbug. And since humbug is the besetting sin of our age, he is the most apposite author imaginable, though now three and a half centuries old.

The traditional view of La Rochefoucauld, of course, is that he was a wicked though witty cynic, embittered by his personal experiences. When Madame de La Fayette, later the tender companion of his old age and author of the first modern French novel, *La Princesse de Clèves*, first read the *Maxims*, she exclaimed, "Ah, what corruption of mind and heart one must have to be able to imagine all that!" And it is hardly surprising that Rousseau, one of the greatest humbugs of all time, hated the maxims, calling them "*ce triste livre*" and remarking that "Bad maxims are worse than bad deeds," the presumed corollary of which is that good maxims are better than good deeds: thus inaugurating our current era of psychological romanticism, that of the real-me as distinct from the merely-phenomenal-me. The merely-phenomenal-me might behave badly, cheat on his wife, tell lies, and so forth, but it doesn't matter much because the real-me preserves his essential core of goodness, because he holds no bad maxims and adheres to good ones. Feeling your pain is better than causing you no pain in the first place.

When I read in the barbershop that there is in the misfortune of our friends something not entirely unpleasing, it did not occur to me that La Rochefoucauld was actually congratulating mankind on its nature: he was asking it to see its own nature clearly. And as soon as I read those words, I reviewed my conduct towards Charlie H. (the work of an instant) and felt deeply ashamed at my callowness and shallowness. Edmund Gosse, in his book *Three French Moralists*, written towards the end of the Great War, got it exactly right: the "*Maximes* are shocking to persons who live in a

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state of illusion about themselves." But, he adds, "The design of La Rochefoucauld was to make people ashamed of their egotism, and so to help them modify it." In other words, knowing the truth will set us free.

La Rochefoucauld's major contribution to humanity's knowledge of itself was his clear-sighted recognition of the protean manifestations of self-interest and amour-propre. His little book—not a hundred pages of modern print—tells us more about human nature than thousands of pages of Freud, and incidentally undermines completely any claim of the Freudians that their hero discovered the workings of the unconscious.

That the exposure of self-interest (and therefore of humbug) was the duke's principal aim is established by a consideration of the first pages of the first edition, published in 1665, which were withdrawn in the later editions published in his lifetime as being too scandalous. The book's full title was *Réflexions ou sentences et maximes morales*: that is to say, La Rochefoucauld did not write only in epigrams, but sometimes in short essays. His opening pages are a consideration of self-love, here extracted:

> Self-love is love of oneself and of all things with regard to oneself; it makes men worshippers of themselves and would render them tyrants over others if fortune gave them the means; it never regards anything outside itself and never settles on anything else except as bees settle on flowers, to extract from them what is needed. Nothing is so impetuous as its desires, nothing so hidden as its designs, nothing so cunning as its methods; its versatility cannot be encompassed, its transformations exceed those of metamorphosis, its complexities those of chemistry. One can neither sound its depths nor penetrate the darkness of its abyss. It is composed of every contrary: it is imperious and obsequious, sincere and dissimulating, compassionate and cruel, timid and audacious; it has different inclinations according to temperament, in some being devoted to glory, in others to wealth, in yet others to pleasures; it changes according to our age, our fortune and our experiences; it matters not whether it has one desire at a time or several, because it can divide its attention or concentrate on one object when necessary, as it pleases. It is inconstant, and . . . subject to an infinitude of changes from within; . . . it is capricious, and one sometimes sees it striving with the utmost urgency and with incredible laboriousness to obtain things which are not at all advantageous, or are even harmful, but which it pursues simply because it wishes to. It is peculiar, and often devotes itself entirely to the most frivolous activities; it finds all its pleasure in doing the most vapid, and conserves its pride in doing the most despicable, things. Such is the portrait of amour-propre, whose whole life is one great long agitation: it may be likened unto the sea, the continual ebb and flow of whose waves is a faithful image of its turbulent succession of thoughts and restless movements.

There is no mistaking the passionate intensity of this passage, but was La Rochefoucauld right? The intensity with which a belief is held or expressed is not, after all, the guarantor of its truth. But, anyone who has observed close up the operation of the cognitive arm of amour-propre, that is to say self-deception, will not lightly dismiss La Rochefoucauld's words. When you have seen and heard, as I have on many occasions, a man in the last stages of cirrhosis of the liver, with a bottle of whisky by his bedside and a glass in his hand, strenuously deny—as he has denied for twenty years past—that a drop of the stuff has ever passed his lips, with all appearances of meaning what he says and of injured innocence and outraged honor when disbelieved, you do not lightly underestimate the powers of human self-deception. Likewise when you have heard a murderer account for his deed with the following words, uttered with the implicit demand that the hearer should believe them as the most literal truth: "A fight broke out, a gun arrived, I accidentally took it, and it went off." Self-deception is to self-love what the personal bodyguard is to the celebrity, and it is the principal cause of misery in the world.

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The lightning & the key: a letter from William Franklin to Joseph Priestley

by Daniel Mark Epstein

June 7, 1802

Exile to exile, England to America,
Driven hence by nothing more than faith
In our convictions, we commune once more,
Old friend, man of science, man of God.
Here they torched your house, there they burnt mine.
Here your people fear your love of France—
Marat, Danton, and the bonnet rouge—
As mine once feared my fealty to the Crown.
Hail, fellow, outcast across the sea!
And thanks abundant, deep, long overdue
For such words as you imaged up to spice
That sky-high tribute to my poor career
Splashed in the magazine a few months past.

Now England numbers me among the great,
"One who stood undaunted before the storm."
Half my royal wage I draw in praise,
Then pension of five hundred pounds a year.
And so I wait for night without complaint,
Grateful for such grace as sunlight yields

William Franklin (1730–1813), son of Benjamin Franklin, was the last royal governor of New Jersey. Joseph Priestley (1733–1804) was a noted English theologian and scientist, and an advocate of the French Revolution.

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On a London balcony in early summer,
And letters such as yours that bid exchange
For welcome sentiments a bit of lore,
The legend of a boy, a kite, a key.
Otherwise the tale would die with me.
Such kindness from you, my father's friend—
(Whose friendship ever joined me to my father)
My late father whom I mourned early and late
As reft from me by politics before God—

Such kindness in the twilight sounds as sweet
As posthumous blessing from his troubled ghost.
With all the trackless universe to roam,
I think he haunts the same old firesides,
Creaking floorboards with his buckled shoes,
Or stealing the owl's voice to interrogate
Whoever, wakeful, might be listening: "Who!
Who's there? Remember me? Who am I now?
Who was I when I walked upon the earth?
Did anybody know?"
And so he goes
In cocked tricorne, frock-coat, and knee breeches,
Wigged or wigless, his broad bald pate,
His lips curled in delight of wine and wit
And ladies' kisses, heavy-lidded eyes,
First to see us through the double lens
The world first saw a man behind, bemused
As much that he had made the spectacles
As that they made folks stop and stare at him.
And so he goes, my father, in death as life,
Rebel, skeptic, rogue, and scientist.
And who should say, O man of God,
That spirit who prized perfectibility
And never knew an end of inquiry,
Who should say this one is not improved
By death, who sought to profit by all means?

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Joseph, you recall when we were young,
My father and I, how I followed him
And how he doted on this "natural son,"
Made in his image, a few inches taller;
Leaner I was, more "imperial" some did say.
I never knew my mother. He was all to me.
He let me choose my horse, my hat, my school,
Thinking such freedom vital to character.
I would have followed my father anywhere,
And did, even into the cannon's mouth.
As Captain to his Colonel, at twenty-three
I led our cavalry against the French
And Indians on the frontier. When peace came
I followed him as clerk in the Assembly,
Postmaster of the City, then all the land.
I was his pupil, factotum, and friend,
Partner in those famed experiments,
One of which now prompts the letter to hand.
(I know I do digress: the ink runs low.
I meant to answer you forthwith,
All about the day we chased the storm
For Truth's sake. But this is science too.
Was I not my father's chief experiment?)

I followed him to England as his aide
On the legation. He bid me study law.
I read my Blackstone at the Inns of Court:
"The King can do no wrong, the King
Is absolute, all-perfect and immortal . . ."
The "round Temple," that turreted shrine
To civil liberties, became my Church.
And nightly in flickering candlelight beneath
High hammer-beams of Middle Temple Hall
I dined with the best-born men of England,
All of us schooled to rule as gentlemen.
In this I passed my father, the day I passed

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Down the aisle of Westminster Abbey,
I, the bastard son of a village printer,
Called to the English bar. A gentleman.
Well-placed letters from this facile pen
Conspired with well-placed friends to fire the comet
Of my preferment. In the court, my star
Blazed up to eclipse my father's embassy.
I'd followed him to England as his aide,
But led him home to America like a Lord,
By our new King named First Royal Governor.

Now maybe his rage is gone, the furious gloom
In which I found myself darkly confined
Years later, when the world turned upside down.
He tried to pull me with him, lectured me,
Threatened, warned me. I was past all that.
In pride I had become my father's sire,
A Governor for him to rebel against,
Chafe, assail, forswear as boys will do
(My own son, Temple, took his turn with me).
But that generation's wrath surprised us all,
Epic, continental, no one could believe it,
Not I, the royal warden of a State.
Then that gang of cutthroats in the night
Clapped me in irons, led me like a bear
Through streets and village greens of New England.
Two long years I rotted under guard
In a verminous cell so low I could not stand.
Think of my dear wife dying of grief,
Dead four months before I heard of it.
Then my son turned against me, lured away
From filial love and loyalty by—who else?
His grandfather, the glamorous minister
To France! While my father spoiled my son
With French wine, mistresses, and foolish hope
The boy would be our next great diplomat,

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I starved in a reeking solitary cell.
While they brokered exchange of prisoners,
I lay with rats in a hole, buried alive,
Sustained by faith my father would save me
The next week, tomorrow, by nightfall.
I could not doubt him, though the world swears
It never could have held me against his will.
Enough of that! When it served the State
To trade a rebel Governor for me,
I got fresh linen, meat, and wooden teeth,
My pension, a new wife, and afterlife
In exile, as living symbol, as prodigy,
The most loved, the most hated man on earth.

Now, for your scientific history.
The incident under study is a trifle,
A woodcut of a kite, a squall, a key,
A man in the prime of his life and his young son
Chasing thunderheads into a pasture
Behind a cold breath of wind. The storm
Mutters low in its throat. The horizon glows.
The kite soars straight up in the storm's face
Like a wish out of one's hand, a frail thing,
A silk handkerchief tacked to a cedar cross
Riding the draft, a wire at the top
To catch the lightning. For a while
We are just man and child, father and son
Dodging raindrops, watching our joy ascend
Higher and higher the unseen tower of wind,
Equal to each other in our delight,
That shared vision of an ideal, joined to us
For a moment by a sleazy string of twine.
That we had seen before. But this was science.
Tied to the end of twine was a silk ribbon
He wrapped his thumb in, a non-conductor,
So the charge would not shoot through his frame

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Should we have luck and net the beast we stalked.
To snare the fire a key hung at the knot.
Still the silk must stay dry while the twine
Steeped in the electric medium of the rain,
Else the operation's bright success
Would spell death to the doctor. Rain fell
And we waited in a cowshed the miracle,
Tethered, watching our kite through the doorway.
It came before we knew, so subtly
I hadn't the eyes to see it, as the clouds
Closed heavier and darker overhead
And drums of thunder rolled across the field.
The loose twine fibers stood up on their ends
Like fur on a cat's back arched in lethal fury.
"Look, Billie! How the charge excites the line:
Fire enough in the key to fry a mouse!"
But who else would believe it? The iron key
Was dull as when I snatched it from the door.

Here is the part of the story few have heard:
I was not a child then, I was twenty.
I was the man pursued a whirlwind once
As branches and treetrunks flew through the air,
Spurring my spooked horse into a thick wood
Where I caught his tornado—it was my report
That proved his theory of the whirlwind's cause.
I had not his genius, but I was brave, and
Thereby his praise, if not his love, I earned.
"Here, father, let them wonder about this!"
I cried over his shoulder, and held the key,
Cutting a brand in my hand no one could deny.
He drew the lightning, I was the one burned.

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Theater

Policy paper plays

by Mark Steyn

There's a charmingly cynical habit that many newspaper editors have of coming up with a deft headline and then commissioning an article to justify it. Some years ago, drowsing through an interminable speech on the environment by the Prince of Wales, I saw a colleague write down the phrase "Flaccid Reign." "We'll run it two months after the Coronation," he whispered.

I expect he will—and who's to say he's getting things the wrong way round? If you start with a great title, you've got something to live up to, to vindicate. In U.S. law, there is no copyright on title—as we are reminded by Warner Brothers's famous attempt to sue the Marx Brothers over their film *A Night In Casablanca*. The Warners alleged the Marxes were infringing their copyright in *Casablanca*. Groucho responded by threatening to sue Warner Brothers for their use of the word "Brothers." So, if you want to write a novel called *Gone With the Wind* or a song called "Over the Rainbow," go ahead. Titles are like truffles—they're out there waiting for someone to sniff them out. If you get to it, and you make it yours, congratulations.

That's what Rebecca Gilman has done with *Boy Gets Girl*. It is a play about a stalker—the theme of a thousand television movies. But it has a vastly superior title to its many predecessors. In the Thirties, Sam and Bella Spewack wrote a nifty Broadway comedy called *Boy Gets Girl* about a couple of hack writers whose every script follows the reliable formula: Boy meets girl. Boy loses girl. Boy gets girl. Seven decades later, Miss Gilman is the first author to spot the darker possibilities of that final stage. The question then is, having found a peach of a title, what does she do to justify it?

Miss Gilman likes "issue" plays: last year's *Spinning Into Butter* (at Lincoln Center) was "about" a liberal New England college dealing with race. This time round, *Boy Gets Girl* (at the Manhattan Theatre Club) is "about" violence against women. *Spinning* spun out of control, the heroine's personal racial issues lost in consideration of large, abstract questions. *Boy Gets Girl*, from its very title, seems to suggest that the author won't be making the same mistake this time round. At least for the distaff side of the stalls, its emotional core is much more immediate: how can any woman be sure that the guy she's dating isn't going to kill her? You don't have to buy into the "all men are rapists" line to recognize that there are a lot of odd coves out there. Those of us who live in placid rural areas know well that almost every lurid crime story boils down to a fellow who cracked and a woman who didn't see it coming.

Scene one of *Boy Gets Girl* is basic boy meets girl. In New York. On a blind date. She's in her thirties, so's he, and that's about all they have in common. Theresa (Mary Beth Fisher) is an editor/writer at something called *The World*—"a magazine on culture and politics and art and crap like

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that," she explains. Tony (Ian Lithgow) is some kind of software techie. He has never heard of Edith Wharton or Theodore Dreiser, which may not definitively mark him out as a psycho but certainly indicates he may not be the Mister Right that little Miss Write is looking for. Incidentally, I haven't commissioned a poll, but I would wager that a substantial majority of American men have never heard of Edith Wharton or Theodore Dreiser. So, if you're a single New York woman and that's a critical priority for you, you should be aware that you've immediately eliminated most of the talent pool. Furthermore, many of the examples of the Republic's sturdy manhood will be fellows who've never read a word of Wharton or Dreiser but have been on enough dates to know the broads unaccountably place a high premium on literary compatibility and so are happy to lie through their teeth. These, it seems to me, are the really dangerous ones.

So one assumes, initially, that Tony is too transparently nerdy to be the psycho: he must be the other guy, the geek who'll ride to the rescue and persuade Miss Cultural Commentator that there's more to life and love than a shared interest in Edith Wharton. This turns out not to be the case: the nut, *c'est lui*. And, in selecting this boy for this girl, Miss Gilman fundamentally weakens her play.

True, it doesn't seem that way. The opening scene is perfectly written, staged, and acted. Mary Beth Fisher, within the first few exchanges, seems to shrink the auditorium so that the eyes are drawn to every gesture—the folding and unfolding and refolding of a napkin. Within a few minutes, she's established herself as our point of view: we see him through her eyes; he is the designated weirdo. The author has a wonderfully sharp ear for dialogue, for the self-consciousness of the dating pitch—the jokes that die, the shifts of subject, the gambits that go nowhere, the fake banter, the nervous laughs, the awkward pauses, the failure ever to fall into a natural conversational rhythm. Every word is beautifully poised and also utterly real. The scene has been widely praised as a brilliant example of contemporary playwriting. And that's true: it's a good example of playwriting, but a terrible example of play *making*. As effective as the scene is, it severely hobbles what follows.

What's wrong with it? Several things. In choosing to have her principals meet on a blind date, Miss Gilman is avoiding many of the questions she claims to be raising. Surely it's more potent dramatically to have boy meet girl naturally, for her to be charmed by him, to marvel at how he too loves Edith Wharton—and then for it all to go haywire. Instead, it's crystal clear from the opening that this couple's going nowhere. She's doing drily self-deprecating urban shtick and he doesn't even notice. She's completely uninterested, and it makes no difference to him; he's pushing just the same. It may be that this illustrates a particular feminist thesis—that the predatory instinct of the male is so powerful it doesn't require anything so mundane as even a hint of mutual attraction—but, while that may work in the lecture room, it doesn't on the stage. If Tony's interest in Theresa doesn't arise from anything in Theresa, then her role in the drama is inevitably diminished: given that his hunger for her is not a response to anything she did, there's nothing she can do to diminish that hunger. It makes her an irrelevance.

So, after that terrible first date, he sends flowers to her office. She agrees to dinner. He essays a few clumsy questions. She says women don't have time to cook anymore. He says, "Are you, like, a feminist?" She says, "I'm, like, a feminist." He doesn't, alas, have a high regard for feminism. Uh-oh. She says she isn't "good relationship material." He doesn't accept the excuse, the polite brushoff, and from there things deteriorate. But nothing that follows quite matches the opening scene and the play never recovers from the strategy required to bring it off. In that sense, it's a betrayal of the title. Why is boy-meets-girl-boy-loses-girl-boy-gets-girl such a reliable trajectory? Because

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attraction is unstable: she loves me, she loves me not, loves me, loves me not. And the great imponderable is why someone we were in love with in 1973, last August, or just yesterday, we're not in love with now. They've got the same hair, same personality, same taste in music: what *don't* they have? A failed love affair calls into question our judgment: why didn't we spot what was wrong? In *Boy Gets Girl*, by contrast, it's evident from the off that he means nothing to her, he's a twerp, he's utterly risible. There is no connection between the two, other than that he's chosen to stalk her as randomly as if he'd plucked her out of the phone book.

It's at this point that the play starts turning into the Women's Studies paper it always wanted to be. Tony's invasion of Theresa continues, his appropriation of her life intensifies, and, just in case we didn't get it, the scene-change musical punctuations get ever more percussively hysterical. But increasingly the scenes seem like staged illustrations of Professor Gilman's talking points: Tony doesn't appear at all in the second act, and his absence seems to confirm that he's just a pretext to kick-start the discussion. The supporting players are not characters as such, but vehicles for various stops on the theories-of-male-violence continuum. Back at *The World*—a title one would hope was ironical but doesn't seem to be—Mercer, a colleague of Theresa's, concedes that he has some darker feelings about his ex and therefore he differs from Tony only in degree. "Normal male heterosexual behavior is somewhat psychotic," he decides. Maybe. But, between Tony and Mercer, differences of degree are not insignificant. If Theresa had dated the guy in the office, things wouldn't have gone *so* badly wrong. But, when you blind-date, your relationships are formed in a vacuum: you're playing New York Lotto—you might get Irv from Accounting, you might get O.J. A dramatist seriously interested in people or human interaction wouldn't feel quite so comfortable asserting that nice Irv is just a guy who hasn't yet got in touch with his inner stalker.

By now, though, Mercer is metaphorically delivering his lecture, complete with slide illustrations. He thinks our psychotic tendencies are deeply embedded cultural influences from old-time screen romances in which persistent boys keep on at reluctant girls until they give in. That's fine for the classroom, but a play ought to be more than a policy position with a set designer, and its best lines shouldn't sound like bumper stickers that don't quite cut it: "When a woman talks, a man just sees her mouth moving," says Theresa. Which 1970 issue of *Ms.* was that insight culled from? For thirty years, books and movies and call-in shows and Oprah guests have repeated that all women are looking for is a man who'll *listen* to them to the point that these days the contemporary equivalent of the ring-a-ding-ding swinger is the man who knows how to pretend to listen: women may fake orgasm, but we guys learned long ago how to fake listening.

On the basis of her last two plays, Miss Gilman's writing seems notable chiefly for its desire to diminish our humanity, to promote the idea that we're simply exponents of some genetic or cultural predetermination. No one relates, except in the most perfunctory ways. No one quite hangs together as a rounded human being. Theresa's magazine, for example, seems to be a hybrid of *The Nation* and *Vanity Fair*, an unlikely and commercially doubtful mélange. Yes, yes, I know Christopher Hitchens writes for both publications, but that's the kind of ludicrously overwritten, unbelievable character you'd need to hold such a magazine together. Then again, Theresa's magazine doesn't seem to have any writers as such: everything seems to be cranked out by the editors. But that in turn starts you questioning Theresa's isolation: it's true that many of us writers are reclusive and misanthropic and not the most adept at conventional romance (see Joyce Maynard on my New Hampshire neighbor J. D. Salinger), but editors tend to be gregarious, clubbable, sociable—especially the female ones.

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It's not just that I would be very surprised to head out on a blind date and find myself sitting across the table from Tina Brown or Anna Wintour; it's possible to believe that Theresa is independent, self-contained, a loner, whatever, but not that such a woman in such a profession would have no ad hoc female support group other than her secretary and a lady cop. It's always a bit of a cop-out when a writer makes a character a writer: there's the whiff of suspicion that making her a realtor or a lab technician, a bus driver or a chiropractor would have involved too much hard work. But the fact that Theresa is such an unlikely editor/writer to begin with undermines the play's trajectory. When we meet her, Theresa's a smart, good-looking, strong, self-reliant career woman. One crummy date extinguishes her identity, both formally—almost immediately, the cops are advising her to change her name—and psychologically, as her personality is slowly displaced by its dark obverse. The loss of self, the obliteration of identity would be far more powerful if Theresa's self were more plausible to begin with. This is a pretty basic weakness in the writing.

There is one surprise in the dramatis personae: Les Kennkat, an aging porno director of the old school—that's to say, the quaint 1970s Russ Meyer kind. Miss Gilman is better at titles for her own plays than for porn movies: Kennkat's sexploitation classics includes *Busty of Chincoteague* and *Succubus Meets Incubus*. Theresa is reluctantly interviewing him for some article, and, though ostensibly uncaring, he's the one male in the play with no ulterior motive. No doubt Kennkat was originally concocted as just another point of view—in this case, that the brute sexism of the old-time pussyhound is more honest and gentlemanly than the false veneer of the new man. As a theory, this would quickly become tiresome. But, as played by Howard Witt, it's as near as we get to a living, breathing human being. Potbelly stretching his lurid shirt, rasping, and wrinkled, Kennkat gets most of the play's best lines, and Witt is happy to use 'em to steal the show, even as all around him slips into despair. Mary Beth Fisher gives a fine, assured, very physical performance that makes her disintegration all too vivid. But there's a glibness to the evening that makes it ineffective as psychological drama, thriller, or basic boy-meets-girl. The play originated at Chicago's Goodman Theatre, directed by Michael Maggio, who died last year. The MTC's Lynne Meadow stepped in to recreate his lean, mean staging for New York. There's much to admire, but the production can't quite conceal the gaping flaw: Miss Gilman never connects up the many issues she raises with her television movie plot; it's like talking about moose hunting while you're ice-fishing.

Male sexuality of a different bent is the subject of *Let A Hundred Flowers Bloom* (at Center Stage). The central character is once again a writer, though this time of gay porn fantasies extending even unto Hitler. But this writer, Puppy, is a wheelchair-bound virgin, whose sexual imagination has to be fired by his overactive AIDS-infected chum Jake. Did I mention this was a comedy? After *Rent* and *Angels in America*, New York could use an AIDS yuk-fest, but this isn't it. David Zellnik has a few jokes he's scattered hither and yon, but comedy is about logic and construction, and this is such a mess that twenty minutes in you're pining for all those overwrought self-aggrandizing downstage ballads from *Rent*.

Male violence is at the dark heart of Edward Bond's *Saved*, a British play from the Sixties notorious for the scene in which a gang of thugs punch a baby, smear it in excrement, and stone it to death in its pram. In those days, the Lord Chamberlain had the power to ban public performances of dramatic works, and in this case he chose to exercise it. The Royal Court converted itself to a "members' only" club in order to stage the work, but wound up getting taken to court anyway. Robert Woodruff's icy revival (by the Theater for a New Audience at the American Place) is the first New York production in thirty years, and its power is

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immediate, from the moment when the curtain rises on two rutting figures on the couch of a sterile airless cinder-block flat.

Bond is a fierce British socialist who went off the rails after the 1979 Tory election victory and started churning out savage indictments of Thatcher too deranged even for his fellow lefties in London's subsidized theater. But his early work is much more varied, and *Saved*'s portrait of a knuckle-dragging fatalistic underclass seems even more pertinent thirty-five years on. I don't think it's so foreign to Americans either—the carelessly accumulated human debris of this household would certainly be familiar to Dr. Laura's listeners. Thus the frenzied coupling is that of Pam (Amy Ryan) and a bloke she's just met, Len (Pete Starrett), who if only in his good-naturedness is the nearest thing to a good deed in this ugly world. Pam lives with her parents, Harry and Mary, and Len soon moves in as the lodger. But shortly thereafter Pam takes up with Len's mate Fred and almost immediately is pregnant with his child.

If the lengthy blood-lust torture of the baby now seems cheap and exploitative—in later plays, Bond devoted a fair amount of energy trying to top its shock value—an earlier scene is as gripping as anything on the New York stage. Somewhere in the next room, Pam's baby cries, but neither the mother, the grandparents, Len, nor anyone else in the squalid flat wants to break off from the oafish snarling bickering to attend to the child. No one listens to anyone anyway: why should they make an exception for the kid? As Pam's dad Harry shrugs, "I ain't gerrin' involved"—the nearest thing to a statement of moral principle and one clung to so tenaciously in this household that it ought to be up on the wall in a sampler. So he didn't get involved with his daughter's upbringing and now that his unloved child is an unloving mother he sees no reason to get involved with that, either. Time passes and events occur but no matter how dramatic or life-changing they ought to be everything stays the same, as if the characters are unable to do anything but dig themselves deeper into their own decay.

The baby, simply by wailing, establishes itself as the most effective member of the household at human communication. The child can at least articulate need, which is something neither Pam nor her parents seem capable of. And thereby the play distills the familiar nature/nurture debate to its essence: our capacity for giving love is cultural, but our need to be loved is biological, and in that fundamental design flaw an awesome chasm of human misery is opened up. The self-evident truth of this seems far more valuable than anything in the slicker *Boy Gets Girl*. Even if you take the view that if you've seen one harrowing drama about the general awfulness of English working-class life you've seen 'em all, Pam is unarguably a richer fictional creation than Theresa. As played by Amy Ryan, she has her share of nervous tics—instead of the folded and unfolded napkin, it's the twitching of her cheap stilettoed heel—but Miss Ryan doesn't opt for the soft bigotry of low expectations: there's no hint that underneath her stunted exterior there's some deeper humanity waiting to be drawn out; any sympathy she arouses must take full account of her wretched selfishness.

Both Bond and Gilman are "exploring" social issues. But, in choosing to explore them through a cast of grunting inarticulates, the British socialist sets himself a greater challenge than the American feminist. By comparison, it seems so easy, doesn't it, to argue gender issues through an intelligent, literate career woman. In fact, with hindsight, *Boy Gets Girl* seems less about gender than it is a subconscious meditation on class. If the protagonist had been a minimum-wage waitress or trainee hairdresser, it would have been less easy for it to descend into a NOW policy paper. But then, as we learned during the last eight years, those twangy big-haired women aren't really part of the sisterhood, are they?

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Art

Rome away from Rome

by Karen Wilkin

Anyone fascinated by the Metropolitan Museum's recent exhibition of paintings by Evaristo Baschenis, the Northern Italian inventor of the still life of musical instruments, needs only the most minimal excuse to arrange a trip to London. The reason? Not an opportunity to see more works by Baschenis, pleasurable as that might be, but something far more ambitious and comprehensive: an exhibition at the Royal Academy promising a rapid refresher course in the context from which Baschenis emerged. "The Genius of Rome, 1592–1623,"[1] a survey of the formative years of Italian Baroque painting, is a thoughtful examination of the innovations and influence of the period's most powerful painters—Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, Annibale Carracci, and Peter Paul Rubens.

The three decades explored by the exhibition were a remarkable period in Rome's long history, a time when the papacy passed through the hands of three powerful and notably cultivated families. In 1592 Ippolito Aldobrandini was elected pope (choosing to become Clement VIII), while 1623 saw the end of the pontificate of Gregory XV, a Ludovisi; in between came Paul V, a Borghese. During this span, Rome was the center of patronage and of art and architecture on a dazzling scale. In this city of luxury and elegance, where political acuity, piety, and sumptuous living coexisted, papal nephews appointed to the rank of cardinal (as they routinely were) commissioned splendid decorations for their villas and palaces. They also commissioned equally splendid works for the churches they administered, since the Catholic church of the period, despite the rigid rules of decorum it imposed on the representation of religious subjects, had an enormous appetite for new images that would capture the imagination of the faithful and strengthen their resistance to dangerous Reformation doctrine. During this time, too, a definitive distinction began to be made between secular and religious art, and new genres of subject matter began to emerge as the specialties of particular artists. Both the secular and the ecclesiastical nobility avidly collected not only sacred art, but also antiquities and all manner of art from their own time. The discriminating, wide-ranging patronage of the Borghese family, especially of Cardinal Scipione, is reflected in the spectacular collection—from Roman mosaics to masterpieces of seventeenth-century painting and sculpture—still housed in the Villa Borghese. That of the Ludovisi, especially of Cardinal Ludovico, is commemorated in the splendid collection

1 "The Genius of Rome, 1592–1623" opened at the Royal Academy, London, on January 20, 2001 and remains on view until April 16. The exhibition will also be seen at the Palazzo Venezia, Rome, in Summer 2001. A catalogue of the exhibition, edited by Beverly Louise Brown, has been published by Harry N. Abrams (360 pages, $75).

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of antique sculptures that forms the heart of Rome's National Museum—including the marvelous relief of Aphrodite rising from the sea into the arms of helpful nymphs, known as the "Ludovisi Throne." In response to this climate of possibilities for both creative and financial advancement, artists, architects, and craftsmen came to Rome from all over to participate in what was later seen, nostalgically, as a "golden age" of art.

The thesis of "The Genius of Rome" is that the defining characteristics of the Baroque were formulated in the paintings of three immensely gifted individuals working in the Eternal City in the earliest years of this glorious era: Caravaggio (born 1571) who came to Rome in 1592 after an apprenticeship in Milan; Annibale Carracci (born 1560) who arrived from Bologna two years later; and Peter Paul Rubens (born 1577) who left Flanders for a long stay in Italy in 1600 and spent extended periods in Rome in 1603 and from 1606 to 1608 while serving as court painter to the Duke of Mantua. Each of these gifted painters explored, in his own way, new notions of realism and idealism, focusing on both the reality of the present and the art of the past.

Caravaggio's contribution was a pitiless realism and an unerring sense of the drama of light and dark. Obviously, there was a lot more to Caravaggio's idiosyncratic paintings than "merely" reproducing what he saw, but in his own day he was believed to have done just that. He was both admired and criticized for not having based his complex figure compositions, as "intellectual" artists did, on an abstract, invented notion of ideal beauty. Caravaggio's influence also extended, as the organizers of "The Genius of Rome" note, to a new kind of picture, defined by his early paintings of music-making boys and cardsharps, in which the everyday was treated with the same ambition and seriousness as subjects drawn from history, mythology, or the Bible.

Annibale Carracci's work was seen by his contemporaries as exemplifying everything that Caravaggio's did not. The truth, of course, is that it is a question of emphasis, since both painters' work is rooted in the common heritage of Northern Italian naturalism and both profited from their study of the art of antiquity and of the more recent past. But if Caravaggio was believed by his detractors to have simply copied the flaws and quirks of nature without editing, Annibale was perceived—just as mistakenly—as having created, exclusively through the exercise of his intellect, a convincing world free of the irregularities of actuality. Present-day viewers, while still keenly aware of the differences between these artists, seem to grasp more readily how much Caravaggio invented, in response to the demands of pictorial requirements, and to appreciate how acute an observer of actuality Annibale was. Yet to his contemporaries and to many subsequent generations, Annibale's disciplined compositions and heroic, elegant figures were seen as expounding an ideal order and an ideal beauty. The painter was thought to have arrived at this high-minded imagery through a process of correcting nature's imperfections by measuring them against his understanding of her perfections and his understanding of the art of the past.

Rubens, who came to Italy to learn from the antique and to absorb the latest pictorial modes, established himself well enough to execute several important commissions during his sojourn in Rome. In a sense, his works announced the possibility of uniting Caravaggio's and Annibale's approaches by fusing coherent spatial organization, utterly convincing naturalistic details, and sublimely idealized types (not to mention the Fleming's virtuoso touch and his ability to make painterly gestures evoke all manner of seductive substances). The organizers of the exhibition suggest that Rubens's most important Roman commission, an altarpiece for the Chiesa Nuova, was one of the first devotional pictures to use iconographic divisions to suggest rational, but nonetheless dramatic, spatial relationships in a sacred

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scene—an innovation with significant repercussions.

By 1610, Caravaggio and Annibale Carracci were dead, and Rubens had returned to Antwerp. Yet the cumulative effect of their distinctive answers to the demands of their patrons essentially posited alternative notions of what a painting could be and provided influential models not only for their contemporaries, but also for several subsequent generations of painters (including, in Bergamo, Evaristo Baschenis). For much of the rest of the seventeenth century, artists in Rome—some Italian, some from elsewhere in Europe—responded both directly and indirectly to the example of their inventive predecessors and made it the basis of their own art. This was not a simple story of cause and effect, as "The Genius of Rome" makes clear. For one thing, artists other than the exhibition's triumvirate contributed to the equation. For another, Caravaggio's highly personal approach soon fell out of favor, although it remained popular with some connoisseurs and with certain younger painters, who, on returning to their native cities, disseminated Caravaggism, with many permutations, throughout Northern Europe. At the same time, Annibale's type of classicism became the basis of a high-minded "philosophical" approach to painting endorsed by the academies and official patrons. The overall result, however, was the generous, accomplished, heroic painting style—with all its many variations—that we now call the Baroque.

At the Royal Academy, the early part of this evolution is traced through a thematically organized installation, with each gallery including statements of the motif by the pioneers and demonstrating its development and variation in the work of the artists they influenced. Unlike the rather simplistic relationships forced upon the protesting permanent collection of London's new Tate Modern, the groupings at the Royal Academy are subtle and instructive. Instead of reducing complex connections—and often equally complex differences—between works of art to the one-dimensional, rapidly grasped categories of the Tate Modern, the installation of "The Genius of Rome" generally encourages viewers to look hard, make comparisons, and weigh the visual evidence.

The question remains whether any exhibition, however ambitious or lavish, could do justice to what was going on in Rome during the astonishing decades under review. The impact and meaning of many crucial works from the period are intimately bound up—metaphorically, as well as physically—with the character of their settings, although it's worth remembering that many of the monuments that seem to define Baroque Rome—the church of Sant' Ignazio, the portico of the Piazza San Pietro, the fountains of the Piazza Navona—postdate the years surveyed by "The Genius of Rome." It seems inevitable that, good as the exhibition is at the Royal Academy, it will be even better this summer, when it is installed in the Palazzo Venezia, not because some important works will be added, but because it will be possible, on leaving the museum, to go—say—down the Corso to Santa Maria del Populo to check on three of the masterworks with which two of the innovators first announced their presence in Rome: Caravaggio's *Conversion of St. Paul* and *Crucifixion of St. Peter*, flanking Annibale's *Assumption of the Virgin*. (Then an aperitivo at the nearby Rosati is recommended.)

Still, "The Genius of Rome" is exhilarating—an intelligently organized show full of wonderful paintings. It is full of surprises, too, some in the form of iconic pictures whose presence inspires open-mouthed astonishment (and curatorial envy), others in the form of less familiar works, occasionally by less familiar artists, that turn out to be terrific. The section devoted to the classical tradition, for example, boasts the first painting Annibale Carracci executed for his patron, Cardinal Odardo Farnese, when he arrived in Rome, *Hercules at the Crossroads* (c. 1595–96, Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples). Annibale's Hercules is a

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massive buff nude clutching an enormous club who sits between a pair of standing women—one facing in, one facing out, to demonstrate the artist's skill at rendering figures in all poses—personifying Virtue and Pleasure. It's an odd, rather rigid picture, but engaging for its blend of Northern Italian detail and antique-inspired generalizations. In the same gallery, the continuation and transformation of Annibale's ideals are demonstrated by a better-known mythological picture, *Diana and Her Nymphs* (1616–7), by his compatriot and sometime assistant, Domenico Zampieri, known as Domenichino. (Before coming to Rome, the younger artist had been a student at the academy that Annibale founded with his artist brother and cousin in Bologna.) Domenichino's gathering of athletic young women engaged in activities that reveal a good deal of appetizing flesh usually ornaments the Galleria Borghese; commissioned by an Aldobrandini cardinal, it was seized by the insatiable Scipione Borghese, and it's easy to see why the hedonistic, art-loving cardinal would lust after this enchanting picture. Domenichino, like Annibale, aspired to an ideal classicism, but at least in this painting his obvious knowledge of antique prototypes, as sources of both images and subject matter, seems to have been softened and made more graceful by an admixture of Venetian influence.

The section of the exhibition devoted to the portrait has equally impressive and illuminating inclusions, such as a confrontational, Titian-inspired portrait by Rubens (from the Palazzo Pitti, Florence) with a glistening purple-brown silk that explains just why his patrons so prized his bravura touch. Another Annibale from Capodimonte is a quirky, slightly crabbed composition recording the oddities of the more exotic members of the Farnese court—a dwarf, a madman, and a "wild man"—along with their non-human equivalents—dogs, a parrot, and a monkey. But the most compelling painting in this section is Domenichino's sympathetic portrait of Cardinal Pietro Aldobrandini's secretary, *Monsignor Giovanni Battista Agucchi* (c. 1615–20, York City Art Museum), an alert ascetic with an intense stare. The small, firmly brushed picture is a marvel of subtle contrasts between crisp paper and crisp linen, pale skin and paler cloth, all rendered with a rich, near-monochrome palette of grays and off-whites. Domenichino portrayed his sitter, apparently a friend, with a directness, breadth of handling, and immediacy that sets the painting apart.

Other sections of "The Genius of Rome" explore such categories as "Painting Nature: Still-life and Low-life Genre," "Painted Music," "The Enticement of the North: Towards Pure Landscape," and "Nocturnes, Night Scenes, and Artificial Illumination," and they cumulatively provide an excellent overview of the diversity of subject and approach typical of painting in Rome at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Within each focused section, this diversity is further explored. A group of small oil paintings on copper, for example, ranging from landscape to devotional scenes to mythology, reminds us generally of the breadth of choice available to collectors of the period and specifically of their enthusiasm for these glowing little pictures. An informative concise wall text reminds us, too, that while the technique probably originated in Italy, northern artists specializing in landscape had adopted it with particular enthusiasm; the popularity of small landscapes on copper, with or without the inclusion of mythological stories or episodes from the lives of the saints, encouraged painters to experiment with similar themes, at a larger scale, on canvas.

The most exciting picture in this section is a vigorous little Rubens of the Judgment of Paris, an early work in which the eager young painter demonstrated both his careful study of important works of art in Rome and his own native exuberance. But the most surprising works on copper are a pair of firmly structured, cinematically framed scenes from the *Iliad* and one of the fall of Simon Magus, all by the Dutch

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painter Leonaert Bramer and dating from the six years he spent in Rome as a young man. Scholars apparently debate whether Bramer's use of dramatic lighting and of equally dramatic contrast between large, boldly cropped foreground figures and small protagonists stems from direct knowledge of Caravaggio's work or from contact with the School of Utrecht painters—themselves profoundly influenced by Caravaggio—whose work Bramer would have seen when everybody was living in Rome. Either way, these are arresting little pictures, quite different from the rather wispy, mannered images that established Bramer's reputation after he returned to his native Delft. *The Fall of Simon Magus* (1623, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Dijon) is the strangest of the three, a weirdly symmetrical composition centering on a dappled horse and a round Roman building, framed by the wheeling arcs of a parasol pine, the back of a seated figure, and a fantastic throne, with the principal characters in the drama of the plunging magician fitted in as best they might be.

The difficulties of satisfying the requirements of a vigilant Counter Reformation church are examined in "Between the Sacred and the Profane." Under Clement VIII, a campaign was mounted to purge Rome's churches of ambiguous sacred images in which sanctity and earthly beauty—especially unclothed earthly beauty—naturalistically presented, risked being confused in the minds of worshippers. Theologians worried, too, that works that paid overt homage to antique prototypes might cause problems, even if they made clear the difference between superhuman, spiritual beauty and the tempting attractions of mortal flesh, because those antique prototypes were pagan deities and therefore bad precedents for Christian imagery. The *Propaganda Fedi* ("Office of the Propagation of the Faith") issued stern directives about what was and was not appropriate to the depiction of sacred personages. Artists occasionally got into trouble if they took too great liberties. (See the history of Caravaggio's first version of *Saint Matthew and the Angel* for the church of San Luigi dei Francesi and of his *Dormition of the Virgin*, now in the Louvre.)

The selection at the Royal Academy leaves no doubt about why the officials of the *Propaganda Fedi* were concerned. Witness Rubens's hunky Saint Sebastian, clad only in a conveniently placed flap of the cloth a ministering angel uses to stanch his wounds, or his voluptuous Susanna, seated so that while the prurient elders get only the back view, we have no impediments. The most equivocal image in this section is the Kansas City version of Caravaggio's petulant young St. John the Baptist (c. 1604–05, Nelson-Atkins Museum). Well, maybe not so equivocal; apparent as Caravaggio's debt to Michelangelo and various classical sculptures is in the pose and modelling of the sturdy, curly-haired boy, the appeal to senses other than the spiritual is equally apparent in the contrast between his luminous, pale skin and the shadowy setting, and between his smooth limbs and the furry sheepskin draped suggestively over his lap.

In the final section of the exhibition, described as its "climax," seventeen large altarpieces are installed "to evoke the atmosphere of a Baroque Roman church." Perhaps. There's more to the atmosphere of a Roman Baroque church than a group of early seventeenth-century devotional paintings disposed at regular intervals in a brightly lit room, even if they are placed rather high, above rectangular gray blocks meant to suggest altars. Still, the ensemble offers vivid evidence of the steady appetite of such new Counter Reformation religious orders as the Jesuits and the Oratorians for up-to-date sacred images—as long as they didn't violate decorum. (Many of the paintings in this section had connections, for example, with the recently constructed church of Santa Maria in Vallicella, known as the Chiesa Nuova, a product of the cult of St. Filippo Neri, founder of the Oratorians.)

And whatever one's reservations about the installation, the immediate effect of this

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section of "The Genius of Rome" is unabashed, drop-jawed astonishment at the presence of two of Caravaggio's most deservedly celebrated works: the *Madonna di Loreto* (c. 1604–05), which usually occupies a dim chapel on the north aisle of Sant' Agostino, near the Piazza Navona, and *The Entombment* (c. 1602–03), originally in the Chiesa Nuova, now in the Pinacoteca Vaticana. In the former, an elderly man and woman, devout peasants on a pilgrimage, kneel before a handsome young woman struggling to support the weight of a robust toddler who gazes intently at the rapt couple; delicately outlined halos signal the divinity of the mother and child, although the shaft of cool light that illuminates them from above does this to even greater effect. *The Entombment* is as complex as the *Madonna di Loreto* is economical. A frozen cascade of mourning women descends toward the powerful body of the dead Christ, a luminous, strangely vital corpse who seems at once to weigh heavily on the figures who support him and to be magically suspended for the contemplation of the worshipper. *The Entombment* insists that attention be paid; Nicodemus stares straight out and captures the gaze of the viewer.

If you can tear yourself away from these delights—although the opportunity to see the *Madonna di Loreto* in decent light and at an informative distance is almost worth the trip to London alone—the room discloses other impressive inclusions: some of Rubens's large studies for alternate versions of his revolutionary altarpiece for the Chiesa Nuova; an elegant Guido Reni of St. Filippo Neri himself, from the same church; and a dramatically lit Guercino of the Magdalen. Once the surprise of the Caravaggios being in London wears off, and you stop wondering whether Sant' Agostino is closed for restoration, cross-connections among all the various images in the room begin to declare themselves. You notice poses and compositional echoes that speak of common sources, as well as of the influence of the exhibition's three stars. Unfortunately, perceiving these reverberations is not always enriching. A rather silly *Martyrdom of St. Matthew* (1617, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Arras), by the French painter, sometime resident of Rome, Claude Vignon, is even sillier once you realize its clumsy debt to Caravaggio's harrowing version of the theme in San Luigi dei Francesi.

The catalogue of "The Genius of Rome" assembles informative essays by an international team of scholars, with their themes roughly paralleling the organization of the exhibition. Edited by the show's curator, Beverly Louise Brown, who also furnished several key essays, it is dedicated to the memory of Francis Haskell, best known as the author of *Painters and Patrons* (rev. ed. 1980), a definitive study of patronage in Baroque Rome. The catalogue is a fitting tribute to this brilliant scholar who died last year: a handsome, scrupulously researched volume, with a wealth of information, including plates and entries for all works exhibited in both London and Rome, plus many helpful comparative images, and, as a bonus, color reproductions that are noticeably less awful than in many other Royal Academy publications. Seeing "The Genius of Rome" made me hunt for my copy of Haskell's dense, absorbing account of the formation of the Baroque city—largely the core of modern Rome. Now if I can find a way to justify a trip to Italy this summer.

Exhibition notes

"John Walker: Time and Tides,"
at Knoedler & Company, New York.
January 18–March 3, 2001

An English-born resident of Boston, John Walker paints on the littorals of abstraction, informed by its history and aims, but not willing to forsake the bedrock of representation and go fully into the non-objective sea. Of course, this aesthetic position has its own vaunted history, one primarily concerned, like Walker, with abstracting the landscape. To his landscapes, which hover

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with certainty between the purely abstract and expressionist representation, Walker brings a vigorous brush and a keen eye for the effects of changing light and weather on the Maine coast. But his new show, "Time and Tides," was divided into two parts: the landscapes and several large canvases that deal with World War I. Viewing it, I was reminded of the importance for an artist of seeing, of having the experience of direct observation.

Turbulent and suffused by haunting, heavily applied autumnal tones, the landscapes are all dominated by a filled-in figure-eight shape, or variations on it, glimmering on the water. In *Fading Storm, Outgoing Tide* (2000), the canvas divides into three broad sectors: a burst of orange-yellow oil interrupting the wide, horizontal brushstrokes of dark paint in the sky's notched rectangle; on the right side, the land occupies an upright and narrow rectangle, in which streaks of green, yellow, and white emerge from among a welter of blues, blacks, and browns; the figure-eight, itself divided lengthwise into brownish yellow and whitish portions, sits in the sea's wide, dark rectangle. Walker is an expressionist in the sense that, for him, emotion is conveyed by color and in eloquent, and rawly energetic, brushstrokes. For instance, the warm reds and oranges in the sea and land give *October Low Tide, Maine* (2000) a valedictory calm, while the blacks and grays of the sky loom like cold winter. My only reservation about these excellent abstracted landscapes is that, by allowing the figure-eight shape to reappear in all of them, it assumes the importance of a symbol, and thereby risks imposing a willed significance on the series. Still, Walker achieves an emotional intensity, which, I suspect, comes from his observation and engagement with the natural world.

The "war paintings," as Jack Flam calls them in the catalogue essay, substitute message and subject matter for the landscape's observed engagement, and, because of this emotional distance (and, yes, willed significance again), they feel at once overblown and aesthetically underwhelming. A number of the artist's family members, including his father, saw action in the Great War, but Walker addresses this fact by covering his canvases with painted quotations from Wilfred Owen, David Jones, and the contemporary poet Rosanna Warren, adding a cross-hatched fence and, off to the side, a uniformed figure surmounted by a sheep's skull. Whereas the landscapes are large—84 x 66 inches on the high end—the war paintings are enormous, fit only for a museum, which further reinforces the sense of striving for importance. Frankly, unless an artist integrates words into the pictorial language of a work, as Picasso and Braque did early in the century, scant pleasure is to be gained by filling the canvas with words, no matter how stirring. Suffice it to say that, in Walker's case, a picture is worth any number of words.

"Nell Blaine: The Abstract Work,"
at Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York.
January 27–March 10, 2001

Like Walker, the American artist Nell Blaine (1922–1996) was also concerned with the interplay of abstraction and representation, although she eschewed pure abstraction for most of her painting life, preferring instead landscape, still life, and portraiture—the work upon which her reputation rests. Encountering Blaine's abstractions from the Forties caused a jolt of delighted surprise. Completed before she turned thirty, Blaine's abstract phase began while she was studying with Hans Hoffman and continued through her inclusion in Peggy Guggenheim's important "The Women" show at Art of this Century (when Blaine was only twenty-one) and her first solo exhibition at the Jane Street Gallery, ending around the time the Jane Street Group dispersed at the end of the decade.

Despite her obvious indebtedness to Léger and Mondrian, Blaine's abstract work—hard-edged, favoring pure colors, black outlines, and biomorphic forms—shows both remarkable plastic ability and

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far more individuality than other followers of Mondrian. In 1946, Blaine wrote "of giving the effect of a decorative pattern even though my main effort has been to bring the picture to life with the most plastic and rhythmic means available. I enjoy hinting at repeats without making them." The evidence of her canvases proves the perfect accuracy of her statement. Rhythm, created by feinting patterns, breathes life into the work. In fact, she memorialized her debt to jazz in *Lester Leaps* (1944–45), the title referring to the saxophonist Lester Young. *Red and Black* (1945) deploys red, gray, and black biomorphic forms, which look almost like cut-out shapes, across a white ground. Also on a white ground, *The Blue Triangle* (1945) uses strokes of alternately circular and straight-edged black paint to outline rounded forms, wedges, and two triangles, some of which are filled in with blue or gray paint, and some of which are left white. The only partially representational work on view, *Composition ("The Duck")*, from 1943, apparently inaugurated Blaine's move into pure abstraction. With its pleasingly expressive, if chaotic, brushwork, and discernible red duck floating over a lit cigarette, *Composition ("The Duck")* resembles a de Kooning rather than the hard-edged abstractionists who soon won her over. Oddly, it is in this early painting that one finds the seeds of her later style, which owes much not only to de Kooning but also to Vuillard and Bonnard. Why, after considerable success in abstraction, Blaine chose to abandon it entirely is a story too involved to rehearse here. By doing so, she made her lasting reputation, but lost something of the jauntiness and urban verve that made this show such an unqualified success.

"Jules Pascin: Important Works,"
at Forum Gallery, New York.
February 8–March 10, 2001

That someone would try to revive the reputation of Jules Pascin (1885–1930) is a welcome and not entirely surprising occurrence: both his subject matter and biography well suit him to contemporary tastes. Born Julius Mordecai Pincas, Pascin (an anagram of his last name) led a peripatetic bohemian life textured by sexual adventure and tragedy. He often painted bordello scenes and other louche subjects. In 1920, after six years in New York, he became an American citizen, but he died young in Paris, a suicide. Pascin's reputation has largely been eclipsed by those of other modern painters, and, from the evidence of his recent show, it's not difficult to see why. Make no mistake, Pascin was an accomplished, even virtuosic, painter and a magnificent draughtsman, but he remained stylistically restless and subtle, not given to brash experimentation. His drawings range from wobbly-lined expressionist caricature to deftly shaded and modeled studies to drawings that employ a spare, Matissean line. And his late, "signature" painting style—soft, Renoir-tinged, and watery—likely seemed rather old-fashioned to later generations of painters.

Deftly incorporating strains of the nascent expressionism, the earlier canvases on view were, to my eye, the most satisfying. Portraits from this period, such as *La Mélancolique* (1909) and that of Isaac Grünewald (1911) balance striking, psychological details—narrowed eyes and a set jaw in the former, a painter's spindly hand, lidded eyes, and distracted mien in the latter—with a somber palette, enlivened in passages by strongly emotional brushwork and patches of brighter colors. One of the finest works on view, *Modèle Devant un Miroir* (1914) depicts, from a steep, downward-looking angle (a viewpoint favored by Pascin), a young nude model reading in a chair in front of a mirror. Calling to mind Balthus's languorous girls—painted decades later, of course—the work seizes on perspective as a means of forming perception. In the mirror, the model's reflected image is framed like a painting, and her comparatively long, nude body carries far more erotic charge than the foreshortened, splay-toed girl seen from above facing the mirror. As he progressed as a painter, so many discernible influences

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came into play—Cézanne, Degas, Soutine, et al.—that one is easily distracted by their echoes. In the Twenties, Pascin developed his characteristic technique of using diluted oils to create washes of color in which float rounded, softened forms of women. His paramour and frequent model, Lucy, compared these paintings to the work of Odilon Redon, though again, Renoir is the more obvious antecedent here. How well one responds to them will depend on the degree to which one can stomach Pascin's at times murky sentimentalizing.

It is in the drawings and watercolors that Pascin gave freest reign to his expressive sensibility. As in a film noir scene, bullet-strewn gangsters and bystanders lie on a vertiginously sloping street in the watercolor *Fermé la Nuit* (1925), whereas *Le Bordel* (1925) lightheartedly caricatures, somewhat in the manner of Toulouse-Lautrec, a bordello patron getting fresh with two ladies of the evening. Pascin's paintings received both critical and financial approbation during his lifetime, but the wild character of his imagination found its most consistent outlet in his drawings.

"Edvard Munch Paintings 1892–1917," at Mitchell-Innes & Nash Gallery, New York. February 7–March 10, 2001.

The masterly Norwegian artist Edvard Munch (1863–1944), whose paintings were exhibited in a rare show in New York in March, never wavered in his idiosyncratic, expressionist impulses. He had the uncanny ability to infuse even the most symbol-laden and iconic images with the terrestrial energy of lived experiences, and, conversely, he managed to raise quotidian scenes to the level of symbols. Of the ten works on view, two were crowd-pleasingly famous and distinctively Munchian. In *Madonna* (1892–1894), the nude torso and placid face of a dark-haired woman sits in a swirling, dreamlike background, which contracts to a red-orange halo above her head. Like its companion, *Vampire* (1917)—wherein a man bows his head as a red-haired woman bites his neck against a dark, billowy ground—the composition is powerfully simple. Nothing distracts the viewer from the central and centered image, itself rendered with great economy. The vampire's dangerous-looking, flamelike hair and peachy flesh define the bent man's head and back as they dissolve into the black of the ground, establishing a sort of painterly concomitant to the man's submission.

Well known as these images are, they gain force by being surrounded by less emblematic but immediately recognizable works. Diagonal strokes of blue, green, and gray paint, laid on with a dry brush, give the impression of driving rain in *Winter Morning* (1892), an early street scene in which six figures are seen from on high. Surprisingly terse and scratchy, the application of paint in *Winter Morning* becomes, in such canvases as *Femme à sa Toilette* (1892) and *Mother and Children* (1906), thicker and more expressively fluid. Munch used impressionist techniques—abrupt touches of paint and a warm palette—to capture the play of light on all three of these canvases, and in all three the figures are rendered with more naturalism than one might expect from him.

In his iconic, or emblematic, mode, he relied on lushly painted, stylized figures, hence his overarching title for these works, "The Frieze of Life." The faces of the seated man and standing woman in *Fertility* (1894) are blank but for the eyes; their forms are outlined in black, as are those of the surrounding plants and the central tree, marked by a forebodingly lopped-off limb. Black paint also describes the shape of the seated woman in *Female Nude by the Shore, Asgardstrand* (1900), in which undulating areas of paint stand for the virtually abstracted beach, hills, stones, and sea. Munch painted all the works here during the important years 1892–1917, a period when the frieze of his life appeared as an almost unbroken succession of masterpieces.

—*Daniel Kunitz*

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Music

Filling the Philharmonic's podium

by Patrick J. Smith

Orchestras, like people, lead lives, and the histories of orchestras inevitably become the histories of a series of lives. In the confined world of the American symphony orchestra, the lives of its putatively top members have therefore a resonance that goes beyond the music played or the people involved.

The New York Philharmonic Orchestra has always held a position of preeminence among American orchestras, not so much because of any marked artistic and performing superiority as because of its position in the media capital of the United States. Added to that, in its long history has been the conductorial fame of two of its music directors: Arturo Toscanini and Leonard Bernstein.

Most commentators would point to another American orchestra—Philadelphia under Stokowski and Ormandy, Boston under Koussevitsky, Cleveland under Szell, or Chicago under Reiner and Solti—as having been "better," in one sense or another, than the Philharmonic, but that judgment had to confront the oft-repeated proposition that, whatever its artistic and performing vicissitudes, on any given night the Philharmonic could outplay anyone. Whether in fact this proposition was true or not was immaterial: it was Philharmonic gospel. But by the end of the twentieth century that gospel tapestry was becoming ever more threadbare.

When the decline began is a matter of debate, but there was a noticeable change with the retirement of Leonard Bernstein as music director in 1970. His successor—in many ways a brilliant choice—was Pierre Boulez. As is the case with the selection of popes in Rome, the selection of music directors follows a course of choosing someone who can bring a different point of view. Certainly Boulez, an uncompromising modernist with, at that time, limited experience as a conductor, represented a daring move. And it must be said that the Boulez years (1971–78) brought much bracing music-making and in certain areas improved orchestral clarity, tuning, and attack. But the consensus was that his music directorship had been a failure as compared to his predecessor's, and with hindsight we can now see clearly that the appointment was premature.

To understand the "premature" aspect, one has to look at the monolith that is the American symphony orchestra and to understand how that monolith has adapted and changed over the past fifty years. To a great extent, the programming canon of the symphony orchestra is bounded by the symphonies of Haydn and Mozart on one end and the works of Rachmaninoff on the other—with all the pillars being German music. Certainly French-oriented conductors like Pierre Monteux, Paul Paray, or Charles Munch can lead orchestras, but all had to have a grounding in "the classics," which meant the German classics: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann,

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and Brahms. Without that grounding, a conductor was fit only to be a traveling guest or a specialist.

Now, it was quickly evident that Boulez, whatever his strengths, had no great affinity for most of the "classic" repertory, and no affinity for Brahms at all. Even with the nineteenth-century composers he admired, such as Liszt, his conception of the music was filtered through a mesh of the later Stravinsky and Second Vienna School composers such as Webern.

The Boulez years, then, unmasked the limitations of his repertory and his indifference (in contrast to his predecessor) to reaching out to a subscription audience. Thus the tone of the concerts—reflected in Irving Kolodin's quip that "Boulez played Debussy's *Iberia* as if it were *Siberia*"—led to a diminishment of subscribers and audiences. Change again was necessary—in a different direction.

Enter Zubin Mehta, warm where Boulez was cool, and a conductor with a deep and thorough grounding in the German classical tradition, having done his studies in Vienna. An era of "Good Feeling" returned, as did subscribers, and Mehta's undoubted abilities, both technical and musical, led to several years of prosperity. The problem was that Mehta remained music director for too long (1978–91). He became bored with the routine, and that boredom communicated itself instantly to the men (and, now, the women) of the orchestra. The guest conductors began to crowd out the image of the music director, and, although the Philharmonic has always taken pride (modelling itself after the Vienna Philharmonic) in having a lot of guest conductors and being able to play in differing styles for each, the orchestra's technical abilities became dulled and their playing often inexcusably sloppy. Mehta seemed not to be able to correct this in his weeks of podium time.

In his last season as music director, Mehta gave an interview that unwittingly pinpointed the problem. He is a noted gourmand, and he indicated that he was anticipating the meal he would have in a famous restaurant—and what he would order—following the concert he was conducting. The implication was that this gustatory prospect took precedence over the details of the music to be played. Whether to take an *accelerando* before the coda was clearly secondary.

The Philharmonic's management realized the orchestra needed a disciplinarian to follow Mehta, and one if possible with a post-doctorate in the classics of the conducting repertory. And so they hired Kurt Masur in 1991—middle-European, steeped in the music of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and a no-nonsense leader. Once again, the orchestra responded to the change, and because of the innate quality of the players (particularly in the first-desk positions) there was a marked and continuing improvement. In the years of the Masur directorship, the orchestra has become one of the top performing groups in the U.S.

This is more important than it sounds because today New York boasts a second orchestra of renown—the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra under James Levine. If the few orchestral concerts per year that they give offer no real rivalry to the Philharmonic, they do offer a serious artistic challenge that is healthy for both performing entities.

It was expected, of course, that Masur's appointment as music director would be extended for a few more years before the management faced the task of changing leadership. But here several factors intervened. A personality clash arose between Masur and the orchestra's executive director, Deborah Borda, which led to his contract being terminated. After a public fuss, this deadline was extended to include the 2001–02 season. But in early 2000 Borda herself departed for a position with the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra, leaving an unresolved situation as to Masur's successor. Zarin Mehta succeeded Borda and to him fell the unenviable task of finding on short notice a replacement.

The 2001–02 season has been billed as

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"Thank you, Kurt Masur." There is a good deal to thank the maestro for. The term "Kapellmeister" is often used derogatorily to refer to a conductor whose knowledge of the literature may be broad, and whose technical skills accomplished, but whose performances come across as at best stodgy and at worst comatose. These people are thought to be the ones given the posts by management who put safety before daring.

But there is a positive side to the term as well, a side that is usually ignored. The Kappellmeister will have a solidity of experience and will, at the very least, pay attention to the level of performing expertise in all sections of the orchestra, both in current playing and in building for the future. At their best, the performances of the Kapellmeister will possess a polish and a depth of feeling that (particularly in the repertory closest to the conductor's heart) will transcend any pejorative implication of the term. Eugene Ormandy, in his many years with the Philadelphia Orchestra, is the best example of the Kapellmeister, as contrasted to the flashier talents of, say, a Fritz Reiner, Georg Szell, or Leonard Bernstein.

Kurt Masur reflects this aspect of the Kapellmeister tradition. The strength of his repertory lies, not surprisingly, in the German romantic tradition—with excursions into the Russian repertory—beginning not with the classicists (Haydn and Mozart) but with Beethoven and Mendelssohn—Mendelssohn being an especial favorite. Brahms is another, and the range of German composers from Schubert to Schumann through Bruckner (plus Tchaikovsky) forms the backbone of his programs.

As might be inferred from Masur's affinity for Brahms, as a conductor he is defined by a weighty "Germanic" sound, strong on propulsions and unity, in which orchestra balance and overall sonority take precedence. He does not emphasize rhythm or quicksilver attack—though it must be added that, for Mendelssohn, Masur is able to conjure up a welcome lightness of touch. "Earnest" might be an appropriate word for his approach; certainly his dumpling Johann Strauss II *Gypsy Baron* of a few summers ago demonstrated that he had not within him much of a sense of musical fun.

His podium manner is that of a warily friendly but vigilant bear: he conducts without baton, hunching his big shoulders and often lurching this way and that; sometimes beating time with his left hand and sometimes not appearing to conduct at all. In his first years with the Philharmonic, he was noticeably under more tension than he is today.

A concert in January 2001 clearly showed Masur's earnestness of approach. The first part consisted of the underrated Swiss composer Frank Martin's deeply affecting *Six Monologues* from Hugo von Hofmannsthal's version of *Everyman*, and concluded with Brahms's *German Requiem*. The performances were powerfully set forward, aided by the rich and expressive baritone of Thomas Quasthoff, who was the soloist in the first and one of two soloists in the second. Quasthoff is a singer whose whole being seems to vibrate with the music and the words. Death is present in both pieces—though Brahms sees death from an emotional distance of solace. Masur's unfolding of the music proceeded with an inevitability of purpose, and he seemingly carried the weight of his orchestra and chorus on his shoulders.

There is little question, however, that Masur's area of expertise has definite limits, even if it does embrace the central German tradition. He has, for instance, little interest in the compositions of American composers, either of today or of yesterday, and though he does program them the effort is for the most part dutiful, and severely circumscribed. In a time of the increasing visibility of the American composer of all musical kinds, a public lack of leadership by the music director of a spotlight orchestra is all the more disappointing.

Of course, because of the Philharmonic's extensive guest conductor weeks, American music specialists such as the National Symphony's Leonard Slatkin can concentrate on

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that repertory. And the Principal Guest Conductor Sir Colin Davis has served to balance the season. Even so, in the past few years the bias towards extremely traditional programming—seemingly endless Beethoven and Brahms cycles, and the yearly performances of Dvořák's "New World" Symphony and Schubert's "Great" C Major—has been marked, and works on the fringes of the repertory (much less outside it) are ever more rarely encountered for fear of scaring away valuable subscriber dollars. A few seasons ago, a deeply romantic and tuneful rarity, the lovely "Rustic Wedding" Symphony of Karl Goldmark, was greeted by hordes of attendees heading up the aisles to the exits, as if the work to be played was by Sir Harrison Birtwistle. Certainly the Philharmonic has had a hand in creating that unimaginative audience response, because of its "top hits" programming.

In a sense, the regime of Kurt Masur represents the end of an era. The central Germanic tradition which he embodies, and which sustained the careers of so many conductors for so long, can now be said to be effectively over. Since the death of Gustav Mahler in 1911, and Richard Strauss's ultimate warhorse for orchestra—*The Alpine Symphony* of 1915—the flow of repertory music for orchestra from Germany and Austria has dwindled to a trickle. That repertory, moreover, has been raided from the other end, as chamber symphonies and "authentic instrument" performing groups have co-opted the German classics, so that today a Haydn symphony, once a staple of the Philharmonic programs, is a novelty.

But what has dramatically changed as well has been the sound of the symphony orchestra. In this regard, we must return to the figure of Pierre Boulez, who becomes with each year more central to today's orchestral music performance. His conducting skills and insights have grown and matured in the years since 1978, putting him in the forefront of that field, and his abilities as a composer have similarly developed and matured.

The type of sound he has been evoking from his orchestra for all of his life has finally come to be accepted by audiences. We today have that kind of rhythm-dominant, lithe, and quicksilver music-making in our ears, and it is no longer thought to be eccentric. After all, it is a lesson in part from the "authenticists"—who learned it not from Gesualdo, Handel, and Vivaldi but from Stravinsky. Through his performances as chief guest conductor with two American orchestras (Chicago and Cleveland), and through his numerous recordings (now, even of Bruckner's symphonies!) and teaching sessions, Boulez is a major presence in fashioning the way we hear music.

Stravinsky, and what could be termed the Stravinsky sound of the 1920s and 1930s, which was once so derided by critics, is central to this repertory shift, which goes beyond the martini-dry works of the period to embrace all sorts of composers European and American. In addition, the works of Russians, from the great nineteenth-century figures to Prokofiev and, latterly, Shostakovich, are also to the fore, with Shostakovich's massive and uneven symphonies now a relative orchestral staple. This can be seen as a prolongation of the Mahlerian symphonic tradition in cyrillic.

The format of the symphony program has also changed. No longer are we presented some narrow variation on an overture, a concerto, and a symphony, but often with freeform menus that might contain from one to as many as five compositions. The American conductor Michael Tilson Thomas, music director of the San Francisco Symphony, for instance, is a master program builder, constructing individualistic evenings in which works stand on their own and also reflect on each other to the advantage of both. He and Gerard Schwarz, his colleague to the north with the Seattle Symphony, have enlivened their cities and added audiences with their musicmaking, and have shown that the much discussed plight of the symphony orchestra in today's disparate society is not necessarily either unreversable or final.

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Kurt Masur leaves his orchestra at the end of the 2001–02 season, and he leaves it in excellent shape, but with its future undecided. The orchestra will then be in the hands and under the baton of Lorin Maazel, a secure if unadventurous choice, and one made for several reasons: name recognition, stature as a major conductor, and immediate impact. But it is not simply a question of what direction the orchestra will take under him. It is generally known that there will be a renovation of the Lincoln Center complex in 2002 or 2003 and that this renovation will likely include a remaking of the acoustically deficient Avery Fisher Hall in yet another attempt to get it right. There is therefore the distinct possibility that the Philharmonic will be out of its home for one or more performing seasons. Where they will perform is still under consideration, and what this will do to quality, to subscriber loyalty, or to "image" is conjectural. In a concrete sense, however, all of these concerns, and their outcomes, will rest with Zarin Mehta, Lorin Maazel, and the Philharmonic Board. Thus the coming years will be of uncommon interest in the history of the New York Philharmonic.

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A New York chronicle

by Jay Nordlinger

Who is the most complete musician in the world? You could argue for André Previn, composer, conductor, and pianist (to give the order he would probably prefer). You could argue for Daniel Barenboim or James Levine, although neither one of them composes. And you could argue—energetically—for Mikhail Pletnev, who, like Previn, is a pianist, conductor, and composer (to give the order most logical for Pletnev). Pletnev is one of the great virtuosos of this or any other age. He won the Tchaikovsky Competition in 1978 at age twenty-one. In 1990, when the USSR was on its last legs, another Mikhail, Gorbachev, allowed Pletnev to form the Russian National Orchestra, the first orchestra in the history of the Soviet Union to be independent from the government. Pletnev conducted the RNO for ten years, then turned the reins over to Vladimir Spivakov, a violinist who has proven his worth on the podium.

The RNO came to Carnegie Hall on February 15, with Spivakov wielding the baton and Pletnev as piano soloist. The concerto was the Tchaikovsky Second, distinguished mainly for not being the Tchaikovsky First. Critics like to gripe about how often the First is played, how hackneyed it is; truth is, you almost *never* hear it in a concert hall. I believe that I have heard the Second performed more often in the last ten or fifteen years—and it is vastly inferior, full of bombast and nonsense.

But it gives a pianist plenty of opportunity to show off technique, which Pletnev did. He is, to put it bluntly, a monster technician. He is capable of anything. He can burn up the keyboard, in the manner of his Russian forebears, yet he is solidly musical, putting his technique to strictly artistic ends. The first movement, he played with majesty and verve. This music is unwieldy, but he managed to tighten it, astonishingly. He plays like a composer, getting under the composer's skin, making the best case for even a silly score. He brought out the melodic lines beautifully. His tone can take on a hard edge—classically Russian—but it is neither metallic nor unpleasant. A little severity in this repertory is no disservice. And, though Tchaikovsky gives the pianist more than enough to do, Pletnev seemed restless at the keyboard, gesturing with the occasional free hand, seeming to want to conduct. A couple of times, he looked at Spivakov as though he would seize the baton from him.

In the cadenza, Pletnev was dizzyingly fast, yet eerily accurate. I made a quick mental list of the finger-men—the "super-virtuosos"—I have witnessed over the years: Horowitz, Richter, Weissenberg, Berman, Watts, Wild, Argerich, Kissin, Volodos: this guy can make them look like Adagio players. And here is the key to his technique, or at least that part of it that relates to speed, accuracy, and smoothness: his arm is never, ever out of position. He never reaches with his hands; the entire arm is al-

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ways right there, in front of the note to be played; the fingers, wrists, and forearms suffer zero strain.

Pletnev played the Andante with an exquisite singing tone, beautifully sustained. And the Rondo—a folkish movement that almost redeems the piece, musically—had not only a sprightliness, but a bracing strength. Pletnev has a keen sense of dynamics, and phrasing, and rhythm. His playing had a spectacular life, with the pianist romping around like a merry demon. This was, indeed, a stunning performance. To hear Pletnev—a sincere musician with the ability of an exhibitionist—is to absorb something historic.

Vladimir Ashkenazy is another versatile musician, conducting now about as much as he performs on the piano. On February 27—also at Carnegie Hall—he led the Philadelphia Orchestra in an all-French program. They began with *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, Ravel's homage to his Baroque ancestor. Immediately, it was apparent that we were in for a bath of that glorious Philadelphia sound, which shimmers and gleams and soaks. This has always been a delightful French orchestra, though not a particularly French-sounding one (and thank goodness for it). As for Ashkenazy, he conducts like he plays—there is no reason he should not. He is, of course, competent and thorough, but also a little calculated, a little blunt, a bit unnatural. Music in his hands sometimes lacks spontaneity or freshness. The Forlane of the *Tombeau* could have been gayer, jauntier; it was rather earthbound. And the Rigaudon had vigor, but not sparkle.

The cellist Steven Isserlis was featured in Henri Dutilleux's *Tout un monde lointain*, a work that is a touchstone of French modernism. Isserlis played it with understanding and beauty. His sound is somewhat small and thin, but it nevertheless serves. Amusingly—or half so—he had trouble with his page-turning. The conductor turned at least one page for him—now there was a display!—and Isserlis fought back some other pages with his bow. Odd that he should not by now have committed this piece to memory.

The high point of the evening was the orchestra's traversal of the Suite No. 2 from Albert Roussel's ballet *Bacchus et Ariane*. Roussel is on practically everyone's list of underrated composers, and some musicians have made him something of a cause. It was good to have him on the Philadelphia's program. His Suite is both "romantic" and "impressionistic," and its program is vivid. Ashkenazy allowed the orchestra to pour on that sound—how could he not?—and he brought out such elements as whimsy, sensuality, and brio. The audience quite properly screamed its approval.

To end the evening was Debussy's *La Mer*, a work that the Philadelphians have glorified many, many times. Ashkenazy gave a perfectly competent reading, but we could see through the composer's mists—not necessarily a good thing. Ashkenazy was disorientingly literal, matter-of-fact, leaving out some of the magic, sacrificing some of the mystery. He was somewhat plodding, too, and the climax was less than it should have been, the conductor having given too much, too soon. This performance had its strengths—chiefly, clarity—but *La Mer* is really *La Mer* when it is hazily Debussyan.

On the stage the following night was a much different orchestra, the Orchestra of St. Luke's, under Roger Norrington, its former chief conductor. Norrington is a leader of the "original instruments" movement, which is also devoted to "original performance practices." He is usually a stirring musician, and his program at Carnegie was an appetizing one: a Mahler arrangement of various movements from Bach's *Orchestral Suites*; a great and beloved Bach cantata (sung by Emma Kirkby); and the Mahler Fourth (with Kirkby as soloist).

Before beginning, Norrington made a little speech to the audience, explaining the links between the pieces to be performed, and offering a little apology, or defense: he is now interested, not only in original

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instruments and original performance practices, but in "original size," and original everything else. He and the orchestra would attempt to perform all of these works just as they were done at the time of their debuts. Such things as the layout—the physical layout—of the orchestra would be the same. Most significantly, the strings would use no vibrato (called "the V word" by Norrington). The conductor regretted that we could not know for sure, for sure how the pieces sounded at the moment they were unveiled, in such matters as dynamics. You at times have to wonder whether Norrington and his comrades consider themselves real flesh-and-blood musicians or museum curators. The museum mentality seems to have taken over much of music.

When the Bach-Mahler began, the sound was shocking: this was the "period" sound to which we have become accustomed over the last couple of decades, but the orchestra was so large! It seemed either too many instruments for that sound, or the wrong sound for that many instruments. It also seemed something of a waste—neither fish nor fowl. Neither Stokowski-big and lush nor Norrington-small and airless. If you are going to do Bach with a large orchestra, why not do it the Stoki way, all out? Here we had the same sickly, scrubby sound as with the "period" bands, only more of it. Nor was the music-making impressive (and that is what matters most): the Badinerie for flute was sluggish, timid, and imprecise; the "Air on the G String" lacked both vibrancy and ethereality—and who can deny the glory of this piece on modern instruments, with a modern sound? It is sad to think that we will have to hold on to our old recordings if we are ever to hear Bach played "incorrectly"—but enrichingly—again.

Emma Kirkby is the vocal equivalent of one of those original instruments. Her cantata was *Mein Herze schwimmt im Blut*, and, whatever the quality of her soprano, her performance was without much life. It was dry and sterile, lacking heart and spirituality. There was a sameness, a monotony, to it. It was probably no help that her face was buried in the score most of the time. It is true that, with Kirkby, you reliably get clarity, cleanness, and good intonation. But her singing can be like dried fruit, when a bit of juice is desired—or like dried flowers, in place of real, fragrant blooms. The players who accompanied her were dry, too, lacking breath or aroma or soul. The maddening thing is that these forces arrogantly assume that they are revealing Bach to us, at long last, after centuries of abuse. Sometimes, it seems more like burying him.

The Mahler symphony, like the Bach-Mahler that began the program, had the shock of oddness: an oddness of sound; a seeming incongruity. Here was a Mahler symphony being played with a sound that seemed more suited to Lully (if him), although Roger Norrington had assured us that it was the correct one, vibrato not having been adopted until the 1930s, long after Mahler had departed. The performance was not without its moments, as Norrington is a shrewd musician: tempos were nicely brisk; the conductor allowed the slow movement to speak for itself (and it does, as Norrington had suggested in his pre-downbeat remarks, recall the "Air on the G String"); some oboe playing was excellent. But there was nothing special or memorable about the account either. Kirkby was okay as the last-movement soloist, affecting in her plain way. She even injected a trace of lyricism. But she was underpowered, drowned out by the orchestra in some vital spots. Almost certainly, Norrington and his people gave an historically accurate reading—but they also failed to give the true Mahler experience, which transports. Their Fourth was stubbornly mundane.

All in all, Carnegie Hall on this night seemed invaded by time travelers. And time travel has its place; for example, it can satisfy academic curiosity. But it can still leave an audience hungry for music.

Heidi Grant Murphy is one of the most appealing young singers currently on the scene. She boasts a high, beautiful, slinky

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voice. It can be both melting and bright, and although it is lightish, it is not without power. Murphy has been heard in New York a lot lately: as Sophie in *Der Rosenkavalier* at the Metropolitan Opera; as a soloist in the Brahms *Requiem* with the New York Philharmonic; and, again, as a soloist in the Vivaldi *Gloria* with the Orchestra of St. Luke's (although not with Roger Norrington, but with his fellow Brit Neville Marriner). In each case, she demonstrated exquisite taste.

So her March 2 recital at Weill Recital Hall—the fetching little annex in the Carnegie complex—was eagerly anticipated. And it turned out, indeed, to be one of the most satisfying vocal recitals in recent memory. Murphy began with Castilian songs from the thirteenth century, accompanying herself on a variety of percussion instruments. Her singing was even, unforced, and utterly assured. It recalls the young Dawn Upshaw in some respects. I also thought of Victoria de los Angeles, emerging from the wings to accompany herself on the guitar, in songs very much like the ones Murphy was doing. Particularly impressive was that Murphy's intonation was spot-on, even without the support of a piano; it would be so, unvaryingly, for the rest of the evening.

After this luminous beginning came a group of songs by Lili Boulanger, the tragic younger sister of the famed teacher Nadia Boulanger. (Lili died at only twenty-four, and it is not merely sentiment that regrets the promise unfulfilled.) Murphy exhibited easy breathing and a marvelous legato in long, expressive lines. She is able to change colors adeptly in the same breath. Hers is an active voice, tonally, with air going through it continually, keeping it alive and interesting. Her onsets are super-clean, and her singing is always clear, even when it is at its most romantic or lyrical. It is an odd physical point that she sings out of a crooked mouth—which obviously presents no impediment.

Her Wolf set (from the Spanish and Italian songbooks) was full of character, at turns decorous, biting, and flirtatious. "Auch kleine Dinge" was especially winsome, delicious. One nice thing about Murphy is that she sings with a minimum of fuss—there is no debris, no clutter, about her. She has few deficiencies, but one of them (and it is not a very great deficiency) is that she has the kind of voice—open, happy, guileless—into which it is hard to put somberness. Sighing and wistfulness, yes; somberness, despair, no. But this is more like a worry than an indictment. In a Rachmaninoff group, Murphy's high notes were alternately gossamer and big. She can follow the crest of a song, aware of its contours. And her technical accuracy is positively uncanny.

At evening's end, it was crossover time, with Murphy offering five not-very-well-known songs from Broadway shows. Seldom will you hear crossover singing so convincing. She did it without a hint of slumming, which is, of course, key. Surely these little numbers had never had it so good. Heidi Grant Murphy is seriously musical in everything she does. Her final encore was the Alleluia from Mozart's *Exultate, jubilate*, clean and delightsome. An intelligent singer with a beautiful instrument and a first-rate technique: what more can the reasonable person ask?

Così fan tutte—Mozart's outpouring of melody and invention—is a true ensemble opera, requiring six steady singers, with no real star among them. (Well, maybe Fiordiligi is the star—she is the primary soprano, after all.) The Met, for its performance on March 3, had a worthy sextet, if not a uniformly sparkling one. The Fiordiligi was Melanie Diener, a German little heard in this country, but enjoying a busy career in Europe. She had an unsteady evening, displaying a bland, somewhat hollow voice and a suspect technique. The sublime trio "Soave il vento" was marred slightly by the bluntness—the lack of pliancy—in that voice. And her big aria, "Come scoglio," needed much more authority and incisiveness. Yet she strengthened as the night wore on, and by the time she got to the second

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act's "Per pietà," she was actually elegant and distinguished. The singing profession is undeniably a difficult one.

The mezzo-soprano was Susan Graham, who scored a major success in the *Rosenkavalier* whose Sophie was Heidi Grant Murphy. Graham, too, is a near constant presence on New York stages, her recital in Alice Tully Hall one of the highlights of the last season. As Dorabella, in *Così*, she was predictably apt and secure. Also having a strong outing was the third woman of the performance, Dawn Upshaw. A veteran now (which is hard to believe), she remains youthful and charming, and her portrayal of Despina was superb: appropriately comic, but without distracting ham. Upshaw has always been a clear, effective Mozartean, even if she sometimes succumbs to cutesiness, in the Kathleen Battle manner (or would it be more fair to Battle to call it the Dawn Upshaw manner?). There was not a trace of such cutesiness this time. Every phrase and inflection seemed right.

Leading the men was Paul Groves, the tenor of the hour for such roles as *Così*'s Ferrando. He has a high, sweet, open sound that goes down very easy, even if it does not stir the breast. His aria, "Un aura amorosa," was nicely done, with some tasteful interpolations, but it was very slow—probably too slow, and not especially Mozartean. Groves, unlike Melanie Diener, wavered as the opera progressed, and he was somewhat clumsy in his passagework. Beside him as Guglielmo was Rodney Gilfry, a sturdy, pleasant baritone who happened, two seasons ago, to give a fine recital in the Weill hall. On that occasion, he sang French songs with memorable distinction; he is a student of the legendary baritone and teacher Pierre Bernac. Gilfry is also known for creating the role of Stanley Kowalski in André Previn's operatic treatment of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and for recording it with vigor and conviction. In the Mozart, he acquitted himself adequately, although his sound seemed a bit indistinct and swallowed in the very large house.

The evening's surprise—at least for me—was the Italian bass Michele Pertusi, who sang with skill and panache. He did everything Mozart asked of him, musically, and he attended to his comic duties with dignity—just as the part of Don Alfonso requires. On the podium was Patrick Summers. He did not cause anyone to forget, say, Karl Böhm. His tempos were on the sleepy side, and the opera occasionally slipped into dullness, seeming long. But he held the proceedings together and contributed some moments of sensitivity. Playing the continuo part—in a nice example of musical continuity in New York—was Kevin Murphy, an assistant conductor at the Met, and the husband of Heidi Grant Murphy, whom he had served as accompanist the night before. For now, Mr. Murphy must be known as the soprano's husband—which is no shame.

Editor's note: We wish to call our readers' attention to the publication of *Mercury: Poems*, by Phillis Levin (Penguin, $16), portions of which first appeared in *The New Criterion*.

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The media

The shock of the few

by James Bowman

You'd think the media would get tired of it. It's more or less the same story every time some deranged youth takes a gun to school and starts shooting the place up—like Kipling's Kurrum Valley scamp "who knows no word of moods and tenses,"

> But, being blessed with perfect sight,
> Picks off our messmates left and right.

What "causes" such behavior? Is it the availability of guns? In the case of "Andy" Williams of Santana High School, California, this was a less favored explanation than usual—perhaps because the gun he used was of a type (a .22 revolver) of which no one had as yet thought to propose the banning. But there were plenty of the usual suspects left. Is it our "violent" culture and images of "violence" on television? Or a more general moral decline? Is it uncaring parents or unobservant teachers? Or are we thrown back upon the "bad seed" explanation? Young Mr. Williams, it appears, had been the victim of bullying, so there were seemingly endless opportunities to discuss what might, assuming that the laws of human nature were repealed, be done about that.

Yet through it all, the media never cast its eyes down to look at the explanation lying coyly under its nose. The kids do it at least in part because doing it makes them instant celebrities. I remember once when I was a teacher asking a class of sixteen-year-olds how many of them thought they would one day be famous. All but two or three hands went up. Even if they did not admit it, the youth culture's devotion to celebrity is well-established. And who is the principal manufactory of celebrities? Why, the media themselves, of course. Thus, the more that the gatekeepers of the popular culture agonize about school shootings, and therefore publicize school shootings, the more school shootings there are likely to be. This seems to me axiomatic. Kids respect celebrity if they respect nothing else, and what did "Andy" crave more than respect?

But the reason we don't notice this explanation is that the meretricious values of the youth culture are increasingly also those of the general culture and, *a fortiori*, of the journalistic culture. Can any star-struck teenager be more celebrity-worshipping than those same journalists and pundits who profess to be mystified by the actions of star-struck teenagers? No wonder the quality doesn't occur to them as an explanation. They would have to suspect themselves. But, as in so many other cases, the myth of journalistic objectivity and neutrality helps to preserve their invisibility to themselves. Naturally they assume that they are observers and not participants in the processes that lead either to school-shootings or to political acts. Their quasi-sacerdotal function in the culture, as invented by themselves, depends on it. Not that that makes it true.

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Actually, not much about journalists' self-conception is true. For people who pride themselves on their fearless pursuit of the truth, they seem to have a remarkable capacity for self-deception. Throughout the presidency of Bill Clinton, for example, they assiduously pretended to believe that he meant what he said, even though they did not believe it. You could tell by the quality of the media outrage when, in August 1998, the president was forced by the DNA evidence to admit that he had been lying to the country about Monica Lewinsky for seven months. Only people who had been desperately trying to believe him and not quite succeeding up until that point could have been so bitterly and vocally disappointed. The more they complained of having been deceived the less deceived they are likely in fact to have been.

There was plenty of evidence before Monica, after all, of Clinton's goatish disposition, and a *prima facie* implausibility to the alternative explanation that a Vast Right Wing Conspiracy had somehow recruited this brainless and even unattractive political groupie to make false charges to the independent counsel. Surely, if the VRWC had been behind Monica it wouldn't have been behind Monica, if you see what I mean. But the will to believe in Bill Clinton was strong—as it again became obvious when the press's outrage didn't outlast his expression of contrition at a National Prayer Breakfast on September 11.

Once again they believed him! He had only to say he was sorry for what he had done, and the press was instantly as willing to believe him as it had been in the first place to believe that he hadn't committed the offense for which he now professed to be sorry. They were, as someone pointed out at the time, like a deceived but devoted wife—who is therefore self-deceived. How many times in the past, one wondered, had he already said he was sorry to Mrs. Clinton for similar offenses? And how many times had she believed him? But where Hillary Clinton's credulity could be attributed to wifely love and loyalty and was really—if that is what it was—rather touching, the media's renewed willingness to believe could not be, whatever else it was, a product of their devotion to the truth.

Nor was it even, necessarily, a devotion to Bill Clinton. Rather, I think, it came about because Clinton, more than any other politician in recent years, had the knack of flattering the media's preconceptions and prejudices about the world, from their dismissiveness towards the Republican "Clinton-haters" to their endlessly repeated characterization of him as a "New Democrat" or (always a great favorite) "our first 'baby-boomer' president." He knew how to live up to the media's expectations of him—which included, in the end, even the expectation that he would misbehave sexually from time to time—without ever becoming merely predictable. Yet to see that the source of his political power was his ability to manipulate the media would have been impossible, since it would have been to see that the media were not disinterested parties, any more than they are in the school shootings.

For it was not only in the Lewinsky affair that the media's self-deception was obvious. Patently absurd and meaningless rhetoric, made to order by the White House focus-group factory, was routinely passed along as if there were something more to it than sloganeering. In many cases, as for example Clinton's announcement in the State of the Union address in 1996 that "the era of big government is over," the slogans were treated as big news. Even when, after his disgrace later that year, Dick Morris made clear to everyone what his methods had been, there was no corresponding disgrace among the press corps who had pretended to themselves and others that a more traditional form of political communication was taking place whenever Clinton opened his mouth.

So when he pardoned Marc Rich and the others whose only visible qualification for a pardon was having given large sums of money to the Democratic Party, or his

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wife's senatorial campaign, or the Clinton library, there was a certain familiarity to the outrage. The press had been deceived in their man again! Fool me twice, as they say, shame on me. So suddenly there was more than enough outrage to go around. They were outraged about the government property that the Clintons took as their own from the White House. They were outraged by the pranks that the Clintonites had reportedly played on the incoming Bush administration. They were even outraged about the alleged looting of Air Force One, which the Bush people insisted had never happened. As George Will said: "I love liberals. The Clintons are guilty of lying, perjury, obstruction of justice, and they give them a pass. But let them steal the toaster, and they say, 'That's it!'"

One can only suppose that the media's willingness to believe what it wants to believe is even more highly developed than most people's because those who are part of the media culture spend so much of their time congratulating themselves on their fearless devotion to the truth. In any case, it was hardly surprising that their willingness to believe in George W. Bush would not be so tenacious. Bush, whom according to Bill Minutaglio's biography a senior Republican official once described as "our Clinton," had known the right note to strike throughout the campaign with his tedious—as tedious as Clinton's nonsensical "bridge to the twenty-first century"—insistence on his commitment to bipartisanship. Like Clinton, he was flattering a venerable media prejudice that a considerable portion of the country's problems could be laid at the door of something they called "partisan politics."

As if there were any other kind! But just as they more or less constantly deceive themselves, they naturally prefer that politicians should also deceive themselves, or at least everybody else, by pretending that they abominate partisanship and really believe in nothing that their party proposes for the public good so much as they believe that they ought to be nice to the other party. But there is a long tradition in the overwhelmingly Democratic media culture of regarding this kind of bipartisanship as basically a one-way street. Democrats, being the home team, are never as "partisan" as Republicans, so it follows that, in order to reduce or eliminate partisanship it is necessary for Republicans to come around to the Democratic point of view on any matter requiring—as which matter does not require? —the purge of partisanship.

Thus it was that George W. Bush's father ran his presidency onto the rocks. In order to impress the Democrats and the media with his bipartisan spirit, he broke his "read my lips: no new taxes" pledge of 1988. Now in somewhat the same way, after the rival tax-cut proposals had been made so much of during the campaign, and after a brief infatuation with the non-Clinton in the White House, the media suddenly began to think that, having won the election, Bush could be expected to demonstrate his bona fides as the bipartisan figure he had promised to be and accordingly make his tax cut look more like the Gore proposal than the Bush proposal.

Thus, after the House of Representatives passed his proposal, Alison Mitchell of *The New York Times* warned that

> President Bush's victory in Congress today may have come at a cost. The bitter House debate on the first phase of his tax cut and the near party-line vote that followed made it harder for Mr. Bush to argue convincingly that he would make good on his signature pledge to change the partisan tone in the nation's capital.

Lisa Myers of NBC News used almost the same words. "This victory comes at a price," she said, citing the sacrifice of Bush's putative bipartisanship in order to enforce a party-line vote.

Such was the consensus, particularly among the television news shows. Dan Rather reported that the victory in the House was "an important step forward for President Bush's big tax-cut plan" while be-

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ing "a big step away from bipartisan cooperation in Congress." Rather's colleague John Roberts was more dramatic, citing "criticism" (provenance unspecified) "that his pledge to change the tone in Washington was shattered on the House floor." Or, as Linda Douglass said to Charles Gibson: "So much for bipartisanship, Charlie. The Republicans rammed through this tax cut, and all but ten Democrats voted against it, and the Democrats are accusing President Bush of reneging on his promise to change the tone in Washington."

Not coincidentally, these words were echoed by Richard Gephardt, the leader of the Democrats in the House, who said that "The President came to town saying, 'I'm a uniter not a divider, and I'm willing to incorporate ideas from the other side into compromise solutions.' That is not happening." Now is it possible for us to believe that Gephardt himself believed for one single moment that it *would* happen? Is it possible to believe that the network news reporters believe that Gephardt believed it? Or even that they had believed it themselves? I don't think so. But like all bipartisanship, it so flattered the media's simple-minded view of what politicians ought to be saying that they wanted to believe it.

Of course they don't want to believe in Bush as much as they wanted to believe in Clinton. You cannot imagine the press defending Bush if, as seems fortunately unlikely, he had a Monica of his own. But Bush has proven as skilled as Clinton at knowing what the press wants to believe and for the most part acting—apart from the occasional necessary lapse, as in the case of the tax cut, into partisanship—as if he believed it himself. Even the Republican leadership in Congress, so notoriously ham-handed with its public relations in the Gingrich days, has learned the trick of it, as we found at the third annual "civility retreat" which took place at the Greenbrier resort in West Virginia at virtually the same moment as bipartisanship was being proclaimed dead in Congress.

Naturally the retreat was reported as having been overshadowed by the partisan vote on the tax cut. Philip Shenon's report in *The New York Times* began with the comments of three Democratic members who claimed to have skipped the retreat for this reason. Though a third of the House, evenly divided between Republican and Democrat, turned up at the Greenbrier, Shenon noted that "the turnout was slightly smaller than hoped for, the result of a boycott by at least a handful of Democrats angry about the events last week on Capitol Hill." Minority Leader Gephardt showed up "though he said this would be his last retreat," reported Shenon. "He added that 'bipartisanship is over—not that it ever began.'"

This, clearly, was the officially disgruntled Democratic point of view, and as usual, the *Times* shared it. Reduced to a brief paragraph in Shenon's report was the news that a study by the Annenberg School of Communications of the University of Pennsylvania released at the retreat had "found that civility in the House had increased in the last two years. The researchers based the finding on, among other things, the number of times that vulgarities and insults like 'traitor' and 'crackpot' were uttered on the House floor."

Could it be that Congress as well as our corporate and media culture are falling into line with the American national religion of "nice"? Or is it, perhaps, more likely, that Congress knows better how to manipulate the media—like the presidents of both parties and pretty much everybody else except the media themselves. Of course, they miss the story of their own manipulation for the same reason that they miss the story of the school shootings: monstrous self-conceit. And one must suppose that, like the endless stories about why kids shoot each other, the endless stories about the need for bipartisanship in Washington will go on, well, endlessly.

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Books

From Englishmen to Americans

by Marc M. Arkin

One evening in the summer of 1787, during the Constitutional Convention, a group of old friends gathered in Philadelphia for dinner. The talk turned to General Washington, now presiding with implacable dignity over the convention's sessions. As the story goes, Gouverneur Morris of New York asserted that he could be as familiar with General Washington as with any other intimate acquaintance. Another guest, Alexander Hamilton, promptly offered to provide dinner for a dozen with the finest wine if, at Washington's next reception, Morris would simply walk up to Washington, clap him on the shoulder, and say, "My dear General, how happy I am to see you look so well." Hamilton, of course, had served closely on Washington's staff during the Revolutionary War, and both he and Morris knew the general as well as any man did.

On the appointed evening, with a substantial crowd already gathered, Morris took up the bet. He walked over to Washington, bowed, shook hands, and then placed his left hand on Washington's shoulder, while repeating the promised words. The response was immediate. Washington reached up, removed Morris's hand, stepped back, and, in silence, fixed his eyes on Morris until the mortified offender retreated into the assembly. No one ever ventured such public familiarity with Washington again.

Yet, a mere thirteen years later, the third president of the United States took to answering the front door of the White House for himself clad in a lounging jacket. While Washington had held formal levees —stationed in front of the fireplace, he met his guests while dressed in black velvet, his hair powdered and gathered behind in a large silk bag, yellow gloves on his hands, holding a cockaded hat edged deeply with black feathers, resplendent in knee and shoe buckles, a sword peering from beneath his coat, bowing deeply from the waist—Jefferson had receptions where he circulated among the crowd shaking hands. It almost goes without saying that Jefferson was among the first to give up the powdered wig and to replace his aristocratic buckles with egalitarian trousers and shoe laces.

Democracy moved so quickly that by the time Dolly Madison became first lady in 1809, she adopted the practice of having "Hail to the Chief" played at state receptions simply to rouse guests to the proper respect for her husband. Perhaps nothing illustrates the direction of the new republic better than the Federalist Vice President John Adams's doomed effort to find a proper title by which to address the nation's chief executive; the senate rejected "His Highness the President of the United States and Protector of their Liberties"—not to mention the classical *Vir Amplissimus*—in favor of plain "Mr. President." In fairness, one should add that even Washington was relieved by the senate's decision; only

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Adams grumbled morosely to his diary about the collapse of decorum.

Even from the vantagepoint of 1830, the world of the framers was impossibly distant. In 1790, the thirteen former American colonies of Great Britain, with a population of barely four million (including 700,000 black slaves) clung precariously to the Atlantic seacoast spread over an area roughly the size of France. Only six cities—Philadelphia, New York, Boston, Charleston, Baltimore, and Salem—had a population of 8,000 or more. Americans had not yet conquered the forest, and the difficulties of overland travel were so great that, as one text remarks, it was almost as difficult to assemble the first Congress of the United States as to convene church councils in the Middle Ages. It took twenty-nine days for news of the Declaration of Independence to reach Charleston from Philadelphia.

Society was different as well. Militia days, elections, weddings, even clerical ordinations were punctuated by the copious use of ardent spirits; the custom of toasting had an established life of its own. Men and women addressed their betters with their hats in their hands. Even in church, no one could forget who was among the governing "wise, good, and well-to-do"; pews were distributed by status in the community. In the same vein, class rank at Yale was determined not by grades but by family status.

By 1830, spurred by the opening of the Western Reserve and the Louisiana Purchase, men and women had poured across the Appalachians and Alleghenies into the trackless lands of the West. Between 1810 and 1820, population west of the Appalachians more than doubled. Missionary societies were formed to build up waste places, which included the rural farmlands of western Connecticut. The population boomed. Even the long-settled cities of the East grew exponentially; between the Boston Massacre and the 1820 census, Boston's population tripled and New York's grew sixfold. Perhaps most tellingly, in 1740 there was one lawyer for every 10,108 inhabitants of Massachusetts; by 1840 the ration was one for every 1153. At the same time, east-west transportation benefitted from a system of "internal improvements," including the "national pike" that eventually ran from Baltimore to Vandalia, Illinois. Spurred by the federal government's example, New York State broke ground on the Erie Canal in 1817. When it was finished in 1825, New York City became the principal gateway to the markets of the upper West.

With the economic and political ferment, old social distinctions broke down. No longer "servants," but "hired hands" or "help," ordinary men and women styled themselves "sir" and "madam," titles formerly reserved for the gentry. A new term, "career," was adapted from horseracing to describe the life patterns of these people, who no longer automatically followed the trades of their forebears. Flush with prosperity, ordinary people painted their barns, stencilled their furniture, laid down carpets in their newly appointed parlors, and subscribed to newspapers and magazines in record numbers. The literary genre of etiquette manuals arose to teach these rootless strivers how to behave in a new world of democratic mores and bourgeois comforts. It was the politician Henry Clay, father of the "American system," who coined the phrase "self-made" to describe these new individuals.

At the same time, new social constraints replaced the old. The religious revival, with its overtones of romanticism, replaced the Enlightenment as the major factor in the cultural landscape. With the resurgence of evangelical religion came an ethos of sentimentalism, a cult of domesticity that extolled women's role as moral educators in the home, and a growing temperance movement that would eventually coin the slogan "Lips that touch wine will never touch mine." When not engaged in making money, this bumptious cold-water army of men and women busied themselves in voluntary associations and social reform movements, ranging from anti-slavery to anti-immigration.

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In her rich new book, *Inheriting the Revolution*,[1] Joyce Appleby adds her voice to the debate on the origins and meaning of our national character, how the colonial Englishmen of 1776 became the Americans of 1830. She argues that the first generation of Americans—those who came of age and dominated American life from 1790 to about 1830—experienced a degree of political and social change unrivalled before or since. This single generation made the transition from a medieval world of hierarchy and deference to the modern market-dominated society we still inhabit. More important, Appleby contends, this first generation reached a kind of closure about the meaning of democracy that has made it difficult for succeeding generations to articulate a vision of America other than the one they created: a society devoted to individualism and free enterprise.

Appleby draws her story primarily from two-hundred autobiographies selected to represent people "who did something in public—started a business, invented a useful object, settled a town, organized a movement, ran for office, formed an association, or wrote for publication, if only an autobiography." In fact, she had a remarkably large field to draw from; there are nearly four-hundred autobiographies by men and women in her age "cohort," itself a telling indication of their self-conscious individualism and their own sense that they had lived in extraordinary times.

Inheriting the Revolution is divided into seven chapters devoted in succession to the themes of responding to the revolutionary tradition, enterprise, careers, distinctions, intimate relations, reform, and a new national identity. As a result, it is less a sustained narrative than a series of analytic essays centering around case histories and anecdotes. Unfortunately, since Appleby rarely dates the events she discusses, a non-specialist may be hard pressed to place them in a meaningful historical context—an important consideration in a book whose theme is the rapidity of change over forty years. This is especially regrettable because Appleby's use of first-person sources might prove engaging to the general reader curious about what life was like for ordinary people in the early republic. Yet, for the specialist, as is perhaps inevitable in such a synthetic work, the author merely glosses the surface of such topics as the growing influence of sentimental fiction, the place of women's friendships in an increasingly circumscribed culture, the growth of Methodism, the rise of professionals, the status of blacks in the North—all of which have been treated with much greater depth and perceptiveness elsewhere in the literature.

The book is serviceably, if not elegantly, written, with a relentless tendency to run-on sentences. It is also studded with a series of truly disconcerting clinkers. These raise questions ranging from the author's sensitivity to the idiom—one entrepreneurial subject "hitched his star to the wagon of industrial development," while another is described as an indefatigable "projector," by which I assume the author meant builder of projects, while "enterprising men knocked against enterprising men like so many billiard balls"—to her sensitivity plain and simple. Referring to the period's preoccupation with mortality, for example, she writes that "death became a kind of investment capital in the emotional economy of the day"! Nevertheless, when all is said and done, what emerges is a striking tale, on its face one of the most celebratory accounts of American gumption in recent historiography.

The fundamental—and perhaps unanswerable—question is where did this explosion of energy come from? By and large, Appleby seems to argue that it all came from the election of Thomas Jefferson in 1800, that Jefferson and his Republican supporters bore primary responsibility for democratizing American politics and commercializing the United States. Throughout her distinguished career, Appleby has been

1 *Inheriting the Revolution: The First Generation of Americans*, by Joyce Appleby; Harvard University Press, 322 pages, $26.

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one of the most important affirmers of Jefferson's role in American history. In a series of articles and in her 1984 book, *Capitalism and a New Social Order: The Republican Vision of the 1790s*, Appleby set herself the task of rescuing Jefferson from his image as a nostalgic agrarian, fearful of commercial development. Instead, she argued that Jefferson was the spokesman for the mass of American farmers, already individualistic and commercial-minded, so different from Old World peasants that European observers constantly remarked on their restless energy and enterprise.

In the early nineteenth century, as Appleby now relates, these farmers, along with ordinary mechanics and tradesmen, abandoned their ancestral lands and ways to engage in "boot-strap manufacturing ventures." She argues forcefully that it was this small-scale manufacturing activity—with its premium on novelty and inventiveness—that fuelled the commercial boom that made America's internal market the largest in the world and created the material conditions for a democratic society.

But, in current American academia, there can be no unalloyed celebration of capitalism, much less a celebration of the connection between capitalism, democracy, and the bettering of ordinary people's lives. To her credit, Appleby does not downplay the connection, but she is compelled to remind the reader constantly of those left behind: the enslaved, Native Americans, women, even those who experienced commercial failure and went bankrupt in the boom and bust economy of the time. She also, if rather belatedly, points out that this egalitarian commercial ideology was largely confined to the North. By the 1820s—after the opening of the old Southwest and the rise in cotton prices reinvigorated the slave economy—the two regions drew further apart, with the South increasingly intent on preserving its peculiar institution. This gives an ironic turn to Appleby's account, since Jefferson was the South incarnate to the Northern Federalists he defeated and who figure in the standard literature as the party of Hamilton and nationalistic capitalism.

Indeed, there is a certain inadvertent quality to the book as a whole; its most obvious lessons do not appear to be the ones that the author wishes us to draw. As the eminent historian Gordon Wood pointed out in a review of *Inheriting the Revolution*, in a 1994 book, *Telling the Truth About History* (co-authored with Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob), Appleby appreciatively discussed the development of social history and the concomitant influence of multiculturalism on the profession. Approvingly, Appleby related how historians who have studied the lives of ordinary people have found "tales of frustration and disappointment" that placed them "on a collision course with the conventional accounts of the American past." In their fiercer incarnations, Appleby saw these radicals claiming that "national identity is a chimera created by the elite to indoctrinate other groups in society with its self-serving conception of the country's purposes." As a result, Appleby acknowledged "the disturbing possibility that the study of history does not strengthen an attachment to one's country." As Wood observed, Appleby herself seems to believe that if she shows that America's traditional identity was an imagined social construction based on the experience of a few Northern white men she can clear the way to shedding that identity for something new and multicultural, something perhaps that will reflect the mores of the academy. And, in her current work, she conscientiously devotes herself to the methods of social history, casting her net widely to find the ostensibly dispossessed. Yet, almost despite her own intentions, what she uncovers is something quite the reverse of frustration and disappointment. The book is filled with tales—from the lives of ordinary people—of enterprise and energy, courage and determination, optimism and hope even in the face of reverses. In giving voice to this faith and tenacity, Appleby actually goes far to explain the continued vitality, pace academia, of America's self-

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image as a land of individual opportunity. There is something bracing about seeing the transformation of Englishmen into Americans not as a work of government—even Jeffersonian government—but as the result of a million acts of ordinary people who, in this regard at least, led their leaders.

Authentically bland

Timothy Day
A Century of Recorded Music.
Yale University Press, 306 pages, $35

reviewed by Alexander Coleman

A few years ago a friend played for me a tape copy of an Edison cylinder recorded by Johannes Brahms in Vienna in 1889. Edison's agent in the city, Theo Wangemann, announces the date and place of the recording and that he is with "Doktor" Brahms himself. After a short pause, the playing begins. I could not at all identify the piece, since the scratch and swish seemed to drown out everything. My friend then conducted what was playing, and it jumped out at me—a snippet from the composer's "Hungarian Dance No. 1" in G minor. What was also evident was a rambunctious, free-wheeling pianism—what the young Artur Schnabel noted as Brahms's "creative vitality and wonderful carelessness." More scientifically, Jonathan Berger, of the Center for Computer Assisted Research in Music and Acoustics at Stanford University, after subjecting the Brahms cylinder to every conceivable scrutiny, notes a "liberal rubato, some protracted fermati, and improvisation at a number of points" and a tempo "considerably slower than any recent recording." My sense is that Brahms was the kind of player who could play a piece all over again using only the notes he missed the first time around.

Timothy Day is curator of Western Art Music at the Sound Archive of the British Library in London. He has given us, at the very least, a study of the history and implications of recorded music from the late nineteenth century to our day, beginning with an inaccurate description of that Brahms cylinder right on the first page of his study. Much of this chronological treatment of the history of recordings—from cylinders to 78 rpm discs (first acoustically, then electrically recorded) to the 33 rpm LP vinyl record (mono, later stereo) and on to the compact disc revolution (not to mention DVD)—has been well covered in such works as Roland Gelatt's *Fabulous Phonograph* (1955, rev. 1977) and Guy A. Marco's *Encyclopedia of Recorded Sound in America* (1993). Moreover, the point of view given in Day's historical overview is decidedly English, not to say provincial. He leaves out many historical developments in the Forties and the Fifties on this side of the Atlantic that deserve scrutiny. For instance: how did the long-playing record develop within the CBS labs? Any reader of the various editions of David Hall's indispensable *Records* (not consulted by Day) would know that, after Columbia's announcement of the LP revolution in the summer of 1948, RCA Victor, in a burst of foolish commercial effrontery, decided that they would put out their own kind of discs, playing at 45 rpm and measuring only 7", which meant that only five minutes or so of music could be contained on each side. The long-playing record, measuring 10" and later 12", and able to contain twenty-five minutes of music, triumphed. Soon realizing that they had been vanquished in this matter, RCA Victor had to eat crow in January 1950 and ask for a license from Columbia Records, the patentee, to put out LP's, which it then proceeded to do along with everyone else, and the 45 rpm record was relegated to the jukebox where it belonged. But for a while, it was a toss-up between two goliaths, William Paley of CBS and "General" David Sarnoff of RCA. There is a real story here, but Day is not interested.

Similarly, while he is careful to point out the technological advances in recording on tape brought about by Decca/London, EMI, Deutsche Gramophon, and Telefunken,

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both in England and on the continent, he never mentions the revolutionary recording technique of C. Robert Fine and David Hall of Mercury Records in the United States—the simple device of hanging one Telefunken microphone over the podium, resulting in a series of still stunning and still revered recordings. The idea was that it was a conductor's business to balance an orchestra, not an engineer with knob in hand after the fact.

Day is right to emphasize the role of the record producer, and he expectedly (and properly) outlines the achievements of three men—Fred Gaisberg, Walter Legge, and John Culshaw. Each is renowned—Gaisberg for his intrepid recording of Caruso in a Milan hotel room in 1902 and for recording Chaliapin, John McCormack, Mischa Elman, Kreisler, Schnabel and Casals, not to mention two great recordings made just before World War II, the Dvorak Cello concerto with Casals, Szell, and the Czech Philharmonic, and a still inimitable Mahler Ninth with Bruno Walter and the Vienna Philharmonic. If Gaisberg was saintly and self-effacing, his disciple Walter Legge was nasty and autocratic, as befits the husband of Elisabeth Schwarzkopf. Easily the most hated man in the business, Legge was characterized in memorable fashion by Sir Thomas Beecham as "a mass of egregious fatuity." Perhaps, but Legge was the sole creator of the Philharmonia Orchestra, the genius behind Angel Records, the discoverer of Herbert von Karajan. Against all odds, Legge certainly got things done—*Tristan und Isolde* with Flagstad and Furtwängler, the Karajan/Schwarzkopf *Rosenkavalier*, the innumerable late recordings of Otto Klemperer, the great series of Viennese operettas, the championing of Lipatti—the list goes on and on. More convivially, the scholarly and reserved John Culshaw is renowned for one of the great sonic achievements of the stereo era—Wagner's monumental *Ring der Nibelungen*, with the best singers of the day and the impassioned collaboration of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra under Georg Solti.

Day is quite justified in giving these three their due, but, as an evocative writer and a critic with insight into people, he has stiff competition from Norman Lebrecht. In *Who Killed Classical Music?* (1997), Lebrecht, the music columnist for *The Daily Telegraph*, wrote about this same trio of producers with a panache and flair that Day cannot manage. As for the same kind of visionaries in the United States, Day does mention once in passing the seminal figure of Goddard Lieberson (head of Columbia Records), but Lebrecht has more detail:

> [Lieberson] signed Stravinsky to record his entire musical output, retrieved Charles Ives from oblivion, lured the iconoclastic pianists Vladimir Horowitz and Glenn Gould [whose signing was actually the work of Lieberson's lieutenant David Oppenheim] to the label, protected the slow-selling Duke Ellington. His original-cast album of *My Fair Lady* sold five million copies in 1957 and helped pay for comprehensive Schoenberg and Webern editions.

The recordings of the Bernstein era with the New York Philharmonic and of such great Broadway shows as *Porgy and Bess* and *South Pacific* were also Lieberson's doing. Little of this information is in Day's book.

Day goes to great lengths to discuss topics that are of a very peculiar and particular interest to an English music lover—the changing timbres over the years of the King's College Choir or whether most of English Rennaissance choir music is being sung a minor third too low. In a subsection entitled "Composers listen to recordings," there is a whole series of speculations concerning particular English composers' first encounters with gramophone records, and their possible influence. In the case of John Tavener, for instance,

> when he was three . . . he played over and over again a record made in 1929 of 250 Manchester schoolchildren singing Purcell's "Nymphs and Shepherds," and his biographer suggests that this is early evidence of his

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> enduring love for high and pure voices and for ritual and repetition, perhaps a defining moment.

Maybe so, maybe not.

The book is also full of odd juxtapositions of intriguing subjects. In chapter III, "Changes in Performing Styles Recorded," a section on "Performance Style in Fourteenth Century Chansons" is followed by "Changing Styles in Webern Performance." All prices for 78 discs are given in pre-World War I shillings, pounds, and guineas, with no table of monetary equivalency in today's dollars. In general, the study seems unnecessarily discontinuous in the organization of its historical materials.

There is, however, and this is to be taken as a very weighty "however," another book hidden within this historical overview. Day has given his study a subtitle, which I purposely omitted from the heading of this review: "Listening to Musical History." The question is what has been the effect of the gradual accumulation of past recorded musical performance on the contemporary performer. And in that sense, we are back to the Brahms cylinder. It is not just that Brahms played his composition with reckless gusto and panache; Day avers that before the recording era *all* conductors, soloists, and singers considered performance as something close to an opportunity for improvisation and on-the-spot reworking of musical texts. It was absolute re-creation, the only reference point being a possible prior audition of the same piece somewhere else. Day describes in rich detail how composers such as Elgar and Rachmaninoff recorded versions of their compositions that were at considerable variance with the musical text in question. Moreover, as Day so convincingly shows, there is no evidence that the distance between the musical score and the sonic realization back then was at all perturbing to the composers in question. After all, they were right there in the studio, in charge of everything.

One of the largest implications of recordings is that they constitute an ongoing record of sonic self-consciousness. This aspect of the power of the new technology is amusingly pointed out by Day when he describes the Gaisberg sessions with the sixty-two-year old Adelina Patti in December 1905. After performing various arias, she threw kisses at the recording machine and was heard to exclaim: "Oh! My God!! Now I understand why I am Patti!! Yes!! What a voice!! What an artist!! I understand everything now!!" On a more serious level, the older artists before the microphone displayed, according to Day, an "improvisatory nature, the slight air of disorderliness, of spontaneity, which disconcerts a modern listener most of all."

> The famous recordings of Beethoven quartets by the Busch Quartet are performances of four distinct musical personalities interacting, as they might express it, rather than the smooth, effortless, meticulous and precisely coordinated and integrated ensemble speaking with one voice characteristic of the 1990's.

(Here, Day is obviously referring to the antiseptic, wholly concerted performing style typical of such groups as the Alban Berg Quartet, the Emerson Quartet, and the Vermeer Quartet.) Day rightly points that "a listener's expectations in the concert hall, in live performances, are based on the standards achieved or seemingly achieved in performances on discs." Today many old orchestral practices sound wrong, or just sloppy. For instance, conductors such as Felix Weingartner and Wilhelm Furtwängler favored arppegiating opening chords, such as the first bars of the Beethoven Third or Seventh—the lower choirs would enter a millisecond before the rest of the orchestra, resulting in a rush of sound rather than a simultaneous chordal blast. These are out of the question today. As an uninitiated friend remarked, "They can't even *start* together!!"

Day concludes that "Recordings have clearly documented the taming, as some might see it, the moderating, the cooling, the classicizing of performing styles." The

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propagation of gramophone recordings has also accompanied a grand tendency toward objectivization in the arts in the twentieth century. Exactitude, without "personal" stylistic interjection, is valued now more than ever, everything must be "authentic." Day suggests that the gramophone in its totality has forced something of a cowed historical consciousness upon all younger performers' and conductors' minds as they ply their craft, and this has resulted in a greater and greater musical literalness, or worse, a blandness both in musical performance and in recording. It would seem that during this now century-long process in which gramophone recordings have played such a key role, much has been gained, and even more has been irrevocably lost.

All perfectly logical

Martin Davis The Universal Computer: The Road from Leibniz to Turing. W. W. Norton & Co., 237 pages $26.95

John von Neumann The Computer and the Brain. Yale University Press, 112 pages, $9.95

reviewed by John Derbyshire

"Every morning I would sit down before a blank sheet of paper. Throughout the day, with a brief interval for lunch, I would stare at the blank sheet. Often when evening came it was still empty. . . . [T]he two summers of 1903 and 1904 remain in my mind as a period of complete intellectual deadlock. . . . [I]t seemed quite likely that the whole of the rest of my life might be consumed in looking at that blank sheet of paper."

That is from Bertrand Russell's autobiography. What was stumping him was the attempt to find a definition of "number" in terms of pure logic. What does "three," for example, actually mean? The German logician Gottlob Frege had come up with an answer: "three" is merely the set of all threesomes, the set of all those sets whose members can be exhaustively paired off with Larry, Curly, and Moe.

However, if the concept "the set of all sets with a certain property" can be used indiscriminately, as Frege used it, then we can construct the set ω of all sets that are not members of themselves. The set of all turtles is not a member of itself, since it is a set, not a turtle. It is therefore a member of ω. But the set of all things that can be defined in fewer than a hundred words is a member of itself, and therefore not a member of ω. Now pose the question: is ω a member of ω? If it is, it isn't, by definition; and if it isn't, it is. This contradiction is named "Russell's antinomy," and, until a way round it could be found, the enterprise that both Frege and Russell were embarked upon—the derivation of mathematics from logic—was dead in the water.

If you had asked Russell, during those summers of frustration, whether his perplexities were likely to lead to any practical application, he would have hooted with laughter. This was the purest of pure intellection, to the degree that even Russell, a pure mathematician by training, found himself wondering what the point was: "It seemed unworthy of a grown man to spend his time on such trivialities." So little can we tell where disinterested inquiry will lead! In fact, Russell's work brought forth *Principia Mathematica*, a key advance in one of the strangest and most unexpected enterprises of the modern age. Among the fruits of that enterprise have been, so far, victory in World War Two (or at any rate, victory at a lower cost than would otherwise have been possible) and machines like the one on which I am writing this review.

The Universal Computer tells this story in eight chapters, each concentrating on a key figure in the story: Leibniz, Boole, Frege, Cantor, Hilbert, Gödel, Turing, and von Neumann. Some of those names will be familiar to any educated person; some have even escaped into the larger culture. Turing was the subject of a rather good play by Hugh Whitmore, *Breaking the Code* (1986).

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He and Gödel both turn up as characters in Apostolos Doxiadis's 1992 novel *Uncle Petros and Goldbach's Conjecture*, of which an English translation was published last year to considerable success.

The strength of this book is in its tracing the continuous chain of events from Leibniz's early attempt at a calculus of propositions all the way through to the stored-program computers of our own time. To follow the stored-program concept backwards: developed by John von Neumann, it rests on the idea that code (the instructions that tell a computer how to act) and data (the stuff that is to be acted upon) can be represented in just the same way in a computer's memory.

Von Neumann got this idea from Turing, whose imaginary "Turing machines" encoded both instructions and data as arbitrary numbers. This in turn followed Gödel, who was able to prove important theorems about symbolic logic by assigning numbers to the symbols. Both Turing and Gödel were inspired by Hilbert's program to encompass both logic and mathematics in a common symbolism, more elegant and waterproof than *Principia Mathematica*. After all, Russell had spotted the contradictions in Frege's system by chance. Who could be sure there were not similar contradictions lurking undetected in the *Principia*? Some more rigorous method was needed for scrutinizing the propositions generated by a symbolic system. Hilbert developed such a method, which he called "metamathematics."

The *Principia*, as I noted above, was an attempt to finish the work Frege had begun, the derivation of mathematics from logic. Both Russell and Frege employed Cantor's set theory to define numbers, and it was by contemplating Cantor's work on infinite sets that Russell uncovered those lethal contradictions in Frege's system. Frege was trying to remove the circularity inherent in Boole's work: if, as Frege believed, mathematics derives from logic, how can you reduce logic to a branch of applied mathematics, as Boole claimed he had done? Boole seems not to have been aware of Leibniz's fragmentary researches, none of which had then been published, and can fairly be given the honor of having breathed new life into the subject of logic.

There are quite a lot of books now attempting to explain advanced mathematical ideas to a general educated public. It is a noble enterprise, but I cannot help wondering what proportion of those books that are bought are ever finished. Davis is a decently good writer and has been intimately involved in this topic for over half a century. He does his best with the material, but still there are parts where the reader will need paper and pencil to follow the argument. Probably the ideal reader for *The Universal Computer* would be someone who got a passing acquaintance with modern logic at college and wants to refresh his understanding and fill some gaps.

The author is at his weakest explaining Hilbert's metamathematics. I doubt, for example, if a nonspecialist reader could grasp the difference between what Gödel proved about completeness in 1930 and what Alonzo Church proved about decidability in 1936. By way of compensation, there is a good Hilbert anecdote, though not my favorite one. (My favorite one: Hilbert's best student died suddenly and the family asked Hilbert to give the graveside eulogy. At the proper time, Hilbert stepped up to the grave, weeping relatives all around, and commenced: "So-and-so's death is a terrible loss. At the time he was taken from us, he was developing some powerful new techniques for dealing with problems in function theory. Consider, for example, a single-valued function f, meromorphic in some bounded open set S . . .")

A computer is, at its heart, simply an instantiation in electronic circuitry of the logical algebra worked out by Boole. Since logic is the systematization of deductive reasoning, which is an activity of the brain, the question irresistibly arises: how similar to what the human brain does is what the computer does? We all know that the brain

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can do many other things beside deductive reasoning. It can recognize a face, see the point of a joke, prefer one political party to another, form an opinion about a book on mathematical logic. Attempts to replicate these processes by means of computer-style algorithms have so far, after forty years of work, not been very satisfactory, to put it mildly. Is this because they are different in kind from the things computers do? Or are they just immensely more complicated?

These questions were of great interest to John von Neumann, a genius of breathtaking scope, and the person with the best claim to have invented the modern computer. *The Computer and the Brain* is the text of some lectures von Neumann prepared in response to an invitation from Yale University. Tragically, the lectures were never delivered. The invitation came in early 1955 for lectures to be given the following Spring. In August of 1955, however, von Neumann was diagnosed with bone cancer. By early 1956 he was thoroughly disabled; he died in February of the following year at age fifty-three.

On opening *The Computer and the Brain*, I expected to find it "of historical interest only" (as one of my own professors used to say rather loftily of *Principia Mathematica*). To the contrary, the book abounds with insights so deep they have not yet been internalized by any but a very small number of specialists. For example:

> It should also be noted that the message-system used in the nervous system . . . is of an essentially statistical character. In other words, what matters are not the precise positions of definite markers . . . but the statistical characteristics of their occurrence. . . . [T]his leads to a lower level of arithmetic precision but to a higher level of logical reliability.

Which is why we are much better at recognizing faces than we are at multiplying ten-digit numbers, and computers contrariwise. One of the revelations of twentieth-century science, in fields from subatomic physics to genetics, is that the world is a very statistical place. Most of the great truths of our time are best expressed as probabilities. This has taken some getting used to—most of us, in fact, are still not used to it.

Everybody knows that mathematicians are burned out by age thirty. Like many things everybody knows, this is not in fact true: de Branges was fifty-two when he proved the truth of the Bieberbach Conjecture, which had vexed the best minds for seventy years. These last papers of von Neumann's show the power and fertility of his mind at the time he died, and leave us wondering what else he might have given us if he had lived a normal lifespan. *Si monumentum requiris, circumspice.*

Birth of the museum

Francis Haskell The Ephemeral Museum: Old Master Paintings and the Rise of the Art Exhibition.
Yale University Press, 208 pages, $25

James J. Sheehan
Museums in the German Art World. From the End of the Old Regime to the Rise of Modernism.
Oxford University Press, 258 pages $35

reviewed by J. Duncan Berry

The precipitous decline in museum standards over the course of the last quarter century has many sources, the most immediate of which is the uncritical absorption of politically correct values from other so-called disciplines in the humanities. This journal has chronicled these developments with manifest dismay. It is thus with a certain pathetic glee that one can now point to the two titles under review as corroborating evidence of the sheer drop we have witnessed. Of course, those who would benefit most from these fine studies are unlikely to consider their lessons.

In this context, the primary lessons are that we have effectively forsaken the enduring rationale of public museums and that

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we have foolishly replaced a tragic sense of history with a more playful, experimental approach to exhibiting art. By a tragic sense of history, I mean to suggest the attitude toward the past that motivated earlier generations of museum directors and curators to be sensitive to the extreme fragility of unique objects, as well as their ignorance of today's temptations of PR coups and the financial pressures that put a premium on multi-destination loan exhibitions and blockbuster shows. Works of art are perishable, and slackened museum policies enabling them to be sent hither and yon court disaster.

The late Francis Haskell, Edgar Wind's successor at Oxford, was one of the very few advocates of restraint regarding lending from one collection or institution to another. He, more than many in the upper reaches of the contemporary museum world, was an outspoken defender of the preciousness of the works themselves; he also understood that massive monographic exhibitions, and their catalogues, often have unintentionally negative results distorting the state of research for a generation or more—largely because the opportunities and tradeoffs involved in museum lending at any given time present potentially artificial, or at least arbitrary, reference points. When the word is out that the Met is mounting a major show on "X," uninvolved museums and curators tend to look in other directions for subjects.

The tale Haskell tells is that of the emergence of temporary exhibitions of Old Master paintings, a tale that begins with the display of private paintings during feast days in seventeenth-century Italy. From these civic demonstrations, the temporary arrangement of pictures (the "ephemeral museums") came to serve more explicitly political and commercial purposes, which only accidentally helped to stimulate the close scrutiny of established artists and their oeuvres, first through criticism and later through connoisseurship and scholarship. Chapters on the unconscionable propagandistic uses to which art was subjected under Napoleon's reign, the commercial vectors involved in the international dispersal of private and princely collections in the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as well as the rise of more explicitly political and nationalistic pretenses for such exhibitions offer a richly instructive series of episodes that condense his larger themes into discrete events. This has always been a hallmark of Haskell's scholarly approach: exactingly concrete examinations of the social dimensions of artistic practices without a hint of what is now *de rigueur*—leftist ideological sermonizing.

Of course, the core element of Haskell's story is the concomitant emergence of an entire category of art objects ("Old Master" paintings) and its intellectual corollary, high art. While the notion of an Old Master and the modern concept of art came into being contemporaneously and reinforced one another in many ways, an account of these intellectual forces remains *terra incognita*.

Haskell's point of view is an inductive, object- and event-based account. James Sheehan's fine survey provides a welcome balance to Haskell not only by addressing the "History of Ideas" head on, but also by tracing how ideas shaped the evolution of museums as institutions, and how they effected the design and experience of museums as buildings.

A certain difference in focus and weight, however, prevents these two volumes from being considered ideal pendants. The first issue is Sheehan's exclusively German focus in contrast to Haskell's more internationalist, and therefore more synthetic, enterprise. At the same time, Sheehan, the Dickason Professor of the Humanities at Stanford University, operates as a conventional historian treading carefully into the domains of art and architectural history. While he has done a laudable and indeed necessary job of bringing together and properly ordering a wide range of material concerning the intellectual and institutional premises of the changing role of museums in the German art world, his account of the buildings' rela-

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tive merits and formal properties is rather thin and derivative. And where he ventures into sociological discussions of museum administrators and visitors, he strays just far enough into tendentious ideological territory to weaken his more factually sound arguments. To dilate on the class divisions of the museum public in the mid-nineteenth century as if one is saying anything meaningful is, frankly, silly; a simple statistical breakdown would have sufficed. His discussion of the personalities of men like von Bode, Tschudi, and Lichtwark, while not offering new insights, finally brings this vitally important material to an English-speaking audience. To read sympathetically about the divisive issues that had the museum world in an uproar a century ago is to see just how anachronistic and *retardataire* today's shock-seeking artists—and museum officials—really are. How fitting that the "progressive" aesthetic and economic arguments of the left, placed in historical context, are in reality old fashioned by their own standards!

As Sheehan approaches twentieth-century themes, such as the legacy of Nietzsche or the conundrum of historicism, he is less trustworthy a guide. Much of my disagreement with him stems from his passive acceptance of the prevailing attitudes regarding the transition from so-called historicism to modernism. Conceptually, the opposition of these two has become utterly threadbare; it supports making superficial arguments about the appearance of styles and neglects far more important strands running through a wide variety of styles, especially in the work of individuals just before and after the First World War. Sheehan is right on target, however, in his evaluation of the significance of the neo-baroque—a very popular style of museum design in the late nineteenth century. The fact that the baroque could be successfully disengaged from its original ideological moorings is an absolutely critical phase in the history of the perception of style as such—both in terms of the value of stylistic arguments by historians, practicing artists, and architects and for the public at large. Again, marshalling all this material between two covers, without profoundly distorting it with today's tendency to view everything predating Hitler's ascension to the power as somehow leading inevitably to that moment, makes it a rare and salutary achievement.

One of the more interesting *leitmotifs* in Sheehan's account is the gradual move toward the experience of art as an autonomous aesthetic entity, as a group of objects increasingly pulled away from devotional and dynastic functions and set aside as vehicles of contemplation. The museum, as the backdrop for this cultural, political, and commercial change, "shaped the conventions within which artists defined their tasks." Today, this axiom has been effectively stood on its head and the inmates are running the asylum.

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Letters

P.C. medicine

To the Editors:

When Anthony Daniels reviewed my book *Mind the Gap: Hierarchies, Health and Human Evolution* (February 2001), he got me badly wrong. Many of us started out with ideas rather like his, but research over the last twenty years has made those views untenable. My book explains why it is the most egalitarian, not the richest, countries in the developed world that are the healthiest.

The United States is richer and spends much more on medical care than any other country in the developed world. Yet its life expectancy is lower than in some twenty other developed countries. Several dozen research papers using different data sets show that societies with larger income differences between rich and poor tend to be less healthy. This is not about comparisons between what we have and some unreachable total equality. It involves comparisons between existing societies. Societies with narrower income differences, like Japan and Sweden, are healthier than the U.S., where they are much wider. Within the U.S., the more equal of the fifty states are healthier than the more unequal, and among the 280 or so U.S. metropolitan areas, the more equal are healthier than the less equal. Daniels omits all the evidence and dismisses the case by suggesting 1) that the differences are unimportant, 2) that increasing equality entails a lot of killing, and 3) by suggesting I am nostalgic for East European Communism. First importance. For the U.S. to catch up with Japanese life expectancy is a task equal to the abolition of all heart disease. The difference in death rates between more and less unequal cities in the USA is comparable to the combined loss of life from lung cancer, diabetes, motor vehicle crashes, HIV, suicide, and homicide. On nostalgia for Communism, he clearly failed to read my work from a NATO Science Committee analyzing the failure of health in Eastern Europe throughout the 1970s and 1980s when the East-West health gap opened up. As for killing in the name of equality, are statistical analyses of the effects of the greater equality in New Hampshire than in New York, or in Sweden compared to the U.S., so threatening that Daniels has to tar me as a despot?

The evidence shows that a greater burden of relative deprivation costs a society dearly in health, in violence, and in the quality of the social fabric. Let us learn from the evidence rather than allowing ourselves to be duped into such a dangerously ostrich-like approach to it.

Richard G. Wilkinson
University of Sussex

Anthony Daniels replies

Professor Wilkinson still artfully conceals the absolute difference in life expectancy between Sweden and the United States: approximately two years, that is to say, seventy-seven years compared to seventy-nine years. Whether such a difference should drive the whole of social and economic policy is, of course, a matter of judgment, especially as the health benefits of egalitarianism remain a matter of purely statistical conjecture.

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If Professor Wilkinson thinks that the main difference between New Hampshire and New York is in their income distribution, he is lacking either information or imagination.

The very concept of "relative deprivation"—no matter the economic condition of the relatively deprived—is inherently totalitarian, since it can only be eliminated by absolute equality of outcome, and absolute equality of outcome can only be brought about by totalitarian means.

Finally, if I have understood Professor Wilkinson aright, he argues that it is the stress of knowing that they live in an unequal society that causes the ill health of the relatively deprived. This being so, I call—in the name of health itself, than which there can be no higher goal—for a moratorium on research into the health consequences of inequality. Ignorance is not only bliss; it is good for the heart.

The museum as fun house

To the Editors:

With regard to Roger Kimball's comments about the recent appointment of the artist Laylah Ali to the position of Assistant Professor of Art at Williams College (February 2001), I write to clarify the reasons behind our recommendation of Ms. Ali for the position. My colleagues and I are not unaware of the fact that Williams College is an affirmative-action employer, but that was not the reason why we voted to hire Ms. Ali. The criteria that matter to us in a studio-art search are the quality of the applicant's creative work, his or her exhibition record, the articulateness of the candidate, and the evidence of his or her effectiveness as a teacher of studio art. A majority of the art department faculty concluded that, in those categories, Ms. Ali was the strongest candidate for this position, in a pool of applicants impressive, I might add, for its size and quality. My colleagues found her creative work to be fresh, genuinely original in conception, sophisticated and nuanced in content, and effective formally. Her presentation during an on-campus interview was judged to have been very articulate, informative, and engaging. We felt that her résumé was very strong: she has received an impressive number of exhibitions and awards for a young artist. Ms. Ali taught briefly at Williams several years ago, and her teaching evaluations were remarkably high. Support for Ms. Ali's appointment in the art department was, and is, broad, crossing generational, gender, political, and disciplinary lines.

Guy Hedreen
Associate Professor and Chair
Department of Art
Williams College

Roger Kimball replies

"The criteria that matter to us in a studio-art search are the quality of the applicant's creative work . . ."? Right. As Dorothy Parker famously put it, "And I am Marie of Roumania."

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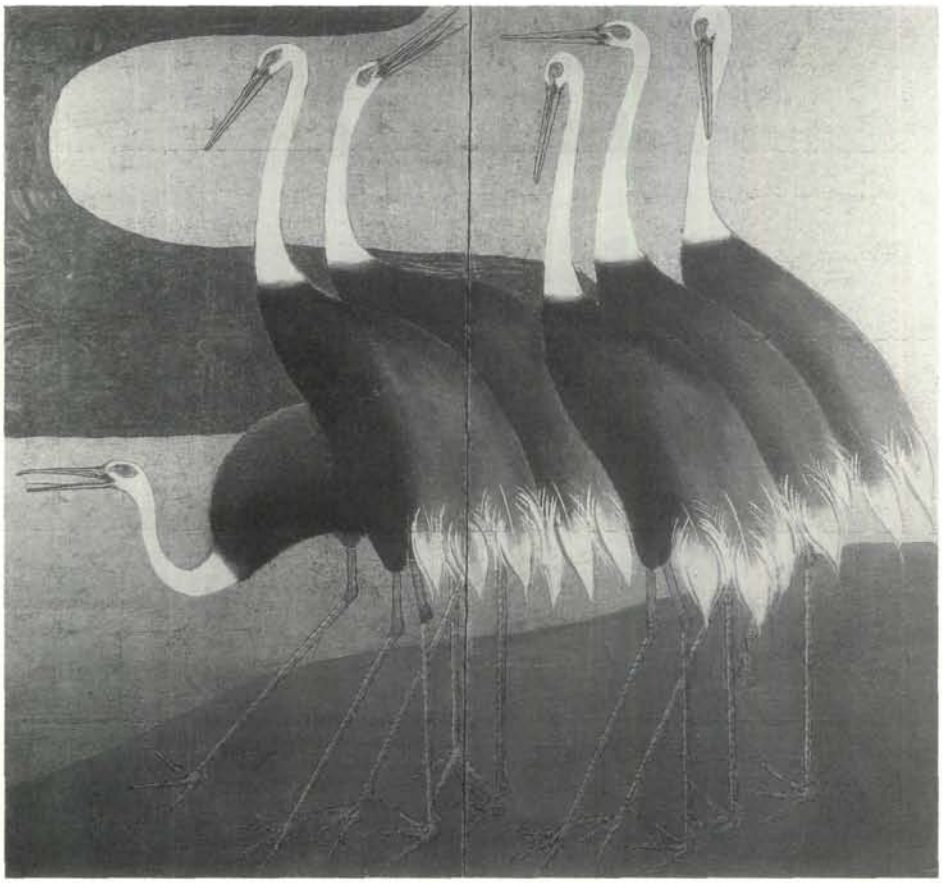

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